



RHYTHMS *of* REST

Finding the Spirit *of* Sabbath
in a Busy World

SHELLY MILLER



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*For H, who embodies a Sabbath heart
and defines rest by the way he lives and loves,
every moment since the day we first met.*

A self is not something static, tied up in a pretty parcel and handed to the child finished and complete. A self is always becoming. *Being* does mean “becoming,” but we run so fast that it is only when we seem to stop—as sitting on the rock at a brook—that we are aware of our own “isness,” of being. But certainly this is not static, for this awareness of being is always a way of moving from the selfish self—the self-image—and toward the real. Who am I, then? Who are you?

Madeline L’Engle, *Circle of Quiet*

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Foreword

Most of us who practice Sabbath came to it slantwise and stumbling. It wasn't some mountaintop epiphany that brought us to the place—it was hopelessness, raggedness, lostness. We were at our wit's end. All our doing had turned into undoing. We had run out of strength and wisdom to manage the wild and yet drab perplexity and complexity of our lives. We had nothing left to give, nowhere else to go.

And then somehow, by some miracle of grace, we heard a voice: *Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*

At the time, we might not have even recognized whose voice it was: we'd grown *that* deaf. All we knew was that our failure to heed the voice would be death. So we came. And we made a beginning, clumsy at first. We weren't accustomed to receiving. We'd lost the art of childlikeness. But slowly, haltingly, we started to breathe again, to feel the hardness of earth and the coolness of water again, to stretch our limbs, to open our eyes, to unclench our fists, to laugh, to cry, to *feel*.

And we discovered whose voice it was: the Lord of Harvest and the Lord of Sabbath. *Eat*, he says. *There is bread to spare*. *Rest*, he says. *I'll keep watch*. *Play*, he says. *Stop trying to run the universe*.

Shelly Miller knows all this. Her book bears the sure marks of the desperate. She is not a guru telling us the secrets of enlightenment. She is a fellow traveler telling us where she found bread. Hers is the testimony of the child who lost her way and then, by sheer grace, stumbled unto the only path that leads home and took the hand of the only guide who knows how to walk it. And now she invites us—out of her own overflowing joy and thankfulness—to find that path, to take that hand.

I wrote a book once about my own discovery of Sabbath. Ever since, the practice of rest has become for me a weekly gift of renewal. And ever since, I look for one thing above all in any book on Sabbath: the author's deep—personal, intimate, in the bones—understanding that apart from Jesus we can do nothing. I look for a second thing as well: that Jesus himself, through the author's words, invites us to abide with him.

Shelly delivers on both counts. Here is her testimony of running out of herself and, just in time, falling fresh into the arms of Jesus. And if you attend carefully to that testimony, you will hear Jesus himself calling you. *Are you weary and heavy laden? Are you tired? Come*, he says. *I will show you my ways. I will give you true rest*.

This, I suggest, is why you're holding this book now: to hear that voice, and heed it.

Mark Buchanan
Author of *The Rest of God: Restoring
Your Soul by Restoring Sabbath*

Beginnings

If you keep the Sabbath, you start to see creation not as somewhere to get away from your ordinary life, but a place to frame attentiveness to your life.

Eugene Peterson, *The Pastor*

The week before Christmas, I make a pact with myself: I will sit down and finish writing personal notes in each of several cards lying in a stack on my desk.

These cards were pulled out of a box on the first day of December, along with ornaments for the tree and decorations for the mantel. My aspirations about the holiday season were obviously fueled by idealism. But before I start another project—wrapping gifts, baking cookies, or tidying up the house—I am determined I will finish what is most time sensitive.

Head bent over my desk, I glide black ink over white linen card stock, insert the cards into envelopes, close the flaps, and affix stamps. Momentum toward achieving the goal I created for myself becomes a syncopated rhythm with the discovery of a missing detail: the address for my new friend Susanna. I compose a quick email, press send, and flip the kettle on.

Hi, Susanna,

Hope all is well in your world. I know this is a busy time for all of us—thinking about you and praying your Advent has been meaningful. Can you send me your mailing address when you have a few moments?

I met Susanna during a speaking engagement, a retreat day for clergy wives on the theme of Sabbath. Every time I scoured the audience for responsiveness, I noticed she was sitting on the edge of her seat making eye contact, and either nodding or scribing copious notes in the notebook on her lap. Body language assured me the message I was delivering, at least for her, was indeed relevant. After I returned home, I received a follow-up email from Susanna, a thank-you with an invitation to meet again. I learned that she is not only the wife of a pastor and the mother of two young children but also a published author seeking direction about her next writing project. We have a lot in common. Over the next few months, generous conversations between us echo the spirit of her timely response to my email, words declaring more than I expected.

“Have I been having a meaningful Advent? Amazingly, yes, and it has so much to do with you! Reading your emails has been so life-giving for me.” I can almost hear the excitement in Susanna’s voice as I read her response and feel my heart begin racing with anticipation.

The emails she is referring to are weekly letters I send to hundreds who make up the Sabbath Society, people who say, “I’m all in” when it comes to making rhythms of rest a reality. The letters are meant to encourage and garner accountability, but often the replies I receive back are more than a thank-you or pat answer to the questions I pose. What I receive instead are accounts of restoration and a surprising return to true self. Susanna subscribed to the Sabbath Society shortly after I extended the invitation to the women attending the retreat day. Susanna’s letter to me continued:

I have started taking time each day for that place of meaning and home and rest. I can't explain it, but I feel happier, more at peace, more able to cope, and weirdly, I realized last night right before going on date night with my man, I like myself more. Over dinner, he said to me, "You're energized, it's great, I love being with you."

I feel like I am finding my way, and I don't ever want to go back. Also, I have been having so many ideas; I know creativity thrives in me when I rest. This year has actually been different! I don't know how I can say this, a pastor's wife before Christmas with two kids in school. Also, I have been more organized and actually seem more on top of things. If they could just bottle it and sell it!

She likes herself more? When I initiated the Sabbath Society several years ago, I had no idea I would receive this kind of response to a weekly email. I didn't foresee mentoring people on how to incorporate Sabbath as a rhythm of life. I don't claim special credentials allowing me to be known as an expert on Sabbath-keeping. I'm still learning every day how to rest well myself. What I know is this: In the same way that beginning a New Year with a clean slate and fresh hope motivates us toward change, finding a rhythm of rest in a busy world makes life radically different. Susanna's positive experience is a common outcome among the community, but I pray that transformation never becomes commonplace. Once you open the gift of Sabbath, you will never want to go back to life as usual.

Rhythms of rest are possible because they were there from the beginning. The account of creation in Genesis is our example. When God created the world, he started with a clean slate and fresh vision. Each day incorporated a specific rhythm with rest as the endgame (Genesis 1–2:4).

On the first day, he created light and darkness, and on the second day, he made the heavens. The third day, he created the earth and filled it with vegetation. On the fourth day of the week, God

separated day from night, creating signs in the moon, stars, and sun for days, years, and seasons. Can you see the preparation in his mind? The way he organizes time with care toward detail while at the same time anticipating future implications?

On the fifth day, he populated the sea with creatures and the heavens with birds. The sixth day, he made beasts that creep and crawl and walk on the earth, and then he made humankind in his image to have dominion over all the animals. And we think *we* have had a full week!

God stood back and looked at all he had done, rehearsing each previous day of work with the conclusion of deep satisfaction. *Good*. He decided the results of his work had been good. Isn't this how we long to approach the weekend, satisfied with our work and ready for relaxation? Unfortunately, contentment in work that lends permission to rest seems elusive. Our work is never fully finished. And that's why we don't allow time for rest.

According to a study by Oxford Economics, Americans aren't using vacation days and are essentially working for free almost one week per year. Workers are only using 77 percent of their paid time off, the biggest decline in the past four decades. In 2013, the report found that U.S. workers took an average of sixteen days of vacation compared with slightly more than twenty days in 2000.¹ And the reasons why people aren't allowing for time off seem to be common no matter the geography.

Fear of an increased workload once we return, working longer hours in order to keep up with the fast pace, we're worried that other people will assess our time off as being slack, lazy, or incompetent. And even when we do have time off work, we may silence the alarm clock and avoid an office commute, but we often use whitespace to get things done: paint a room of the house, clean the garden until our bones ache, polish the boat, or carpool kids to birthday parties and sporting events. Time off often means we rehearse what we will do next.

On the sixth day, God didn't say, "I'm finished"—full stop—as a justification for a day of rest on the seventh. God is in the business

of continually creating, and his work is never fully finished. The work you have to do while you are on this earth is never fully finished either. Sabbath isn't an allowance for rest when the dishes are done, projects are complete, or when your volunteerism is on hiatus.

Genesis tells us that a day of rest was on God's heart long before he made it a commandment. The seventh day is more than a day to sleep in, check out, and be a lump on the couch while binge-watching our favorite TV shows. The day God chose to rest is the first time he names something *holy*.

Holy is unique to God's character, a nature Christians aspire to imitate for achieving moral character. But don't confuse holy with perfectionism in following a set of rules. *Holy* means "set apart," which isn't only limited to people. *Holy* is also used to describe places where God is present. Words like *transcendent*, *awe*, *supernatural*, *fear*, and *reverence* are also used in conjunction with describing the holy.

Holy isn't a word we often use to describe Sabbath in today's culture. We assume a day set apart for rest is impossible, old school, unattainable, not holy. Here is one of many examples I gleaned affirming this notion; a status update from a friend on Facebook.

Well, another Sabbath day arriveth, my friends. The problem I'm finding is that Sundays rarely feel restful and life-giving.

We're hustling and bustling in the morning to get ourselves and the kids ready for church. "For heaven's sake, come here and put your pants on so we can go!" is often said to one or both of the kids every Sunday. And sometimes [my husband] has to say it to me, too.

Then there's church itself, which is always a crapshoot with our kids. It can go fine or REALLY NOT FINE—and usually a crapshoot with me too. Small talk isn't my forte, and every now and then being in church opens up some old wounds that are still healing. So it's a tender time. (I see you, folks who still can't go to church. I see you.)

Then there's lunch after service. We jet home, wrestle [my daughter's] phenomenal stubborn will to get her down for a nap, get [my other child] settled after a high-sensory-input morning, then start cleaning and getting ready to host our small group at 5 p.m. (that can include up to twenty people).

Then there's the kids' bedtime routine. After they're out, I completely crash, only to get up and start the week on Monday, totally drained and wiped out.

SUNDAYS ARE NOT SABBATH FOR ME.

I'm trying to figure out how to honor and practice the art of Sabbath in our home when Sundays look like anything but rest for us.

*Sincerely,
Drained in Utah*

Sound familiar?

I believe the frustration *Drained in Utah* is communicating is common among many—the assumption that Sabbath is a routine we create. But God created rest to be as natural as breathing. Sabbath is the exhale required after six days of inhaling our work.

Routines are meant to be structured with a specific purpose in mind. Think of dancers, cheerleaders, marching bands, taking the trash out before collection, or even the routine of caring for an elderly person. One small misstep has negative implications and sometimes dire consequences. Routines are often rigid and concrete, correct or incorrect. Usually a person implements rules or follows a routine in order to control a specific outcome. Routines aren't bad; after all, most of us implement a routine of showering, brushing our teeth, and eating three meals a day. We like knowing when the trash will be picked up.

Rhythms, on the other hand, are nuanced and unique to each individual. Rhythms describe the art of living a life embodied with meaning and intention in the same way God creates. The way you move out, adapt to, and integrate with the world around you is like

a free-flowing dance of choices. Pay attention to your surroundings, adapt while remaining open to adjustments, and integrate with the world around you. Rhythms shift while remaining focused on what is most important.²

A plethora of studies show that the brain requires alternating periods of structured work followed by unstructured rest in order to maximize function. And my friend Susanna is one example among many, proving that in a matter of a few weeks a rhythm of rest is not only possible but life-giving, no matter what your stage of life or circumstance. Sabbath is realistic even when the time you choose to rest is the busiest day of the week. But Sabbath isn't limited to the weekend.

When God made remembering Sabbath the fourth commandment,³ he asked us to make the day holy and set apart. And when Jesus came to the earth as one of us, he set us free from the law of how Sabbath should look. The commandments are still relevant today because truth never changes; it is always and eternally true. However, Jesus' sacrifice on the cross for our sins changes the rules of Sabbath to a day of grace. He is waiting for us to be with him and to trust that his commandments are good, no matter what day or how much time we choose to give him. Jesus *is* Sabbath. When we make the day different on his behalf, holiness inhabits our intentions.

A few years ago, during Advent, I stumbled upon Sabbath only to find *awe*, *transcendence*, and *reverence* aren't just words describing the God we know from Genesis, but a common way of experiencing him when rest is the focus. The unexpected surprise we open each week is like a letter sliding into your inbox: personal, generous, and more than you expected. Rest isn't only a choice we make from a menu of options, but rather the focus of our time set apart from work.

Whether a rhythm of silent pauses at your desk, a couple of hours to quiet thoughts midweek, or a whole day to play and ponder on the weekend—when we choose a rhythm of Sabbath, everything changes. You may even like yourself more.

But first, you must choose to begin.



CHAPTER ONE

Baby Steps

The Sabbath is not for the sake of the weekdays; the weekdays are for the sake of Sabbath. It is not an interlude but the climax of living.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*

I don't do guilt. As I stare at the time beaming from the screen of my phone, those words push to the forefront in the cacophony crowding my thoughts.

In a pleather chair, my husband sits next to me, and on the other side, a row of strangers. Scrolling through emails and social media, I intermittently look up, hypervigilant as people walk through security pulling suitcases. It's the third week of Advent, and my mother-in-law, Geri, left Phoenix and is flying on windwings heading east. She'll land at dusk at Myrtle Beach. I prepared for her arrival with clean sheets and twinkle lights decorating the headboard in the spare bedroom; wrapped packages with gift tags bearing her name lie underneath a decorated Christmas tree. Celebrating the season begins when she pulls her carry-on through

the living room. In all the preparations for her presence with us, I didn't have time to buy groceries. Now after her long, tiring day of cross-country travel, we have to stop for food on the forty-five minute drive back home.

I don't do guilt. It's the mantra I adopted from my mother-in-law more than twenty-five years ago when I became one of her children, a phrase as familiar as her welcoming blue eyes and the accepting smile we witness as she walks through the gate. I come from a long line of Catholic guilt in my ancestry. A spiritual mutt, I was disciplined by the Baptists, infused with the spirit of the Pentecostals, embraced by the nondenominational melting pots of mega churches in the Midwest, and now, serving as an Anglican and the wife of a priest, I find that I still need to practice her words often.

We share many fond memories from Geri's extended stays with us, whether resting at our family cottage in Canada for summer vacation or celebrating holiday seasons. But storytelling around the dinner table is one of my favorite activities when she visits. With one ear tuned to Grandma's stories and the other to the commotion around us, our teenagers, Murielle and Harrison, sink into their chairs to quietly listen. We are equally riveted as if it's our first time hearing about Miller family antics.

No matter how many times Geri retells stories of traveling and adventure, my kids never seem to tire of hearing about their dad as a teenager, fresh with new driver's license in his back pocket on the Autobahn, speeding like a professional race car driver. But on this visit, we hear a new story over plates of spaghetti, one of our last meals together at a restaurant before she flies back home to the desert.

She tells us about an evening out with a family at a private Jewish dinner club. As they choose seats around a table, the hostess escorts her young son to the bathroom. Geri notices a lighter next to the candles on the table, and before she sits down, she picks it up, flicks it on, and sets each wick aflame. When her friend returns to the table, horror is written on her face.

In Jewish tradition, on Sabbath, the eldest woman of the house recites a blessing over the candles no later than eighteen minutes before sundown: *I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.* After lighting each candle, the woman moves her hands in a circular motion three times as if bringing the warmth of the flame closer in and then recites a blessing: *Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the universe, who sanctified us with his commandments and commanded us to be a light to the nations, and who gave us Jesus our Messiah, the Light of the world.*¹ Geri had no idea how many minutes were left before sundown that evening and she assumed they would pray over the meal once each person took a seat around the table. A thoughtful gesture she assumed was helpful turned into an embarrassing situation she will never forget. Over bites of pasta, laughter erupted in unison as we listened to her honest, self-deprecating portrayal regarding the mishap.

Guilt is one of the main roadblocks for making Sabbath a reality. Guilt about the things we leave undone, and guilt when we don't rest perfectly. Lofty expectations about a day set apart for rest keep us immobilized, and Sabbath elusive. Guilt is usually a sign that you've made rest a routine with strict rules. If you struggle with guilt about taking time to rest, then perhaps you are trying to implement a Sabbath routine instead of a rhythm of rest.

When we adopt Geri's mantra, *I don't do guilt*, a simple act can become sacred when we ascribe meaning to it, separating the mundane from the holy—reciting a special prayer, lighting a candle, and preparing different food from the usual fare. Sabbath, I learn, is a sacred day separating what is most needful from the smorgasbord of options on your plate. We will feel as though we don't exactly know how to do it right, but the mystery will woo us back to light the candles the following week. Through practice, we discover the discipline of rest doesn't require a special anointing or particular stage of life.

On Saturday, after Geri flies back to Phoenix, I begin cleaning up evidence of celebrating for two weeks and make room for

Christmas dishes to be stacked back in the china cabinet, moving plates and fragile keepsakes behind doors underneath. I push a silver coffee urn gently beside a row of champagne flutes and grasp delicate Shabbat candlesticks, one in each hand. *Shabbat* is a Hebrew word used for Sabbath, which means “to cease.” We must cease in order to rest.

Slowly sliding one of the fragile candlesticks on the dining room table, I am careful not to take any chances of breaking them. Placing the other silver bottom upright in the palm of my hand, I hold it above my head toward sunlight streaming through the high dining room window. The hollow blue glass in the middle becomes translucent, light revealing imperfections. Turning it around slowly, I admire the bubbles and streaks of pigment unnoticeable behind glass. I inspect the decorative silver flowers wrapped around the candle cups like a lab technician looking through a microscope. The creative artistry piques curiosity about the meaning behind the beautiful craft.

“Hey, why aren’t you using the candlesticks I bought you?” H asks as he saunters through the living room, back to his recliner. (Yes, my husband’s name is only one letter; more about that later.)

He caught me. The truth is, when H came back from a trip to Israel and gently unwrapped each gift he’d picked out for us, it seemed as if he’d read my mind when I saw the candlesticks he bought for me. That same year, I read *Mudhouse Sabbath* by Lauren Winner. Her perspective on the ways Jewish tradition enhances a Christian pilgrimage renewed expectancy I had allowed to go dormant. I hadn’t nourished what God had planted in my heart. Handling those candlesticks germinated what had been forgotten like a green shoot poking through the hard earth after winter’s frost had passed. My soul remembered what my mind forgot. But God waited until the petals of those initial thoughts about Sabbath were fully open after Christmas to capture the full aroma of something important he was planning to birth. His timing is perfect, even when it sometimes feels as though he has forgotten or is busy with something more important.

With every day closer to the end of Christmas vacation, I find myself exhaling repeatedly, pushing air through what feels like a straw in my chest. On this last Saturday before resuming our workaday life, simple tasks become weighty. I push the vacuum cleaner under the table, sucking up glitter and pine needles while imagining swimming in the lake at our family cottage in Canada, hearing the call of loons through the open window and watching fog roll over canoes upturned on the beach.



My mind goes back to the previous summer. A towel is wrapped around my waist over a damp swimsuit, my go-to outfit at the cottage. As we gather at the faded yellow island in the kitchen for lunch, I slice summer sausage and cheese and serve it on blue Melmac plates next to a pile of crackers. Murielle and Harrison curb their immediate hunger with plump green grapes from a bowl.

Earlier, bare-chested boys in swim shorts meandered through the woods between the family cottages—sandy-haired cousins in search of Harrison for a ride on the four-wheeler. We were all congregated next door, welcoming family members visiting from Germany, entertained by the bilingual accent of youngsters swinging in the hammock. Listening to tales of backpacking through Europe from one, and the missionary journeys to the Amazon from another, our newest addition to the family, Noah—married in from Uganda—kept us engrossed with stories of competing in the world swimming championships alongside Michael Phelps after teaching himself how to swim as an adult.

“I’ll come over after lunch,” Harrison yells to the boys through the screen door. They quickly scurry off, bare feet padding through the tall grass strewn with dandelions.

Leaning into the back of her chair at the table, Murielle tilts her head slightly and remarks, “We have an international family, don’t we? I never realized that for some reason.”

Hand and I look at each other, responding with smiles and nodding. Tales of adventure and risk for the kingdom inspire us toward the

fulfillment of hope. Cultural diversity awakens something dormant in both of us. We long to experience the vastness of the world's people through traveling, yet feel left behind in the tiny seaside village where we live. It's a curiosity we've kicked around for nearly ten years—why God moves us to places where the intimacy we long for in community remains absent.

“Hey, how would you define belonging and fitting in?” H asks the kids on a whim from the kitchen sink. One bare foot inside the dining room and the other on the porch, Harrison pushes the screen door open, chewing the last of a cookie. “Belonging is being accepted for who you are, and fitting in is changing who you are to be accepted.”

I am dumbfounded. My teenage boy, growing into manhood, nails it.

Brené Brown describes it this way: “Fitting in is about assessing a situation and becoming who you need to be in order to be accepted. Belonging, on the other hand, doesn't require us to change who we are; it requires us to be who we are.”²

Busyness bullies with a false message of fitting in, something my adolescent son already knows at a young age. Most of us have believed the fallacy the world advertises: achieve, produce, and earn success in order to gain acceptance, love, and ultimate happiness. But the more we fill our lives with yeses, even noble and good ones, who we are slowly drifts into obscurity until all that remains is a shadow of our former self, void of purpose and definition. When we believe there is never enough time to do everything, we become aimless and forget why we are here on the earth. “Everything is wearisome beyond description. No matter how much we see, we are never satisfied. No matter how much we hear, we are not content,” writes the teacher in Ecclesiastes (1:8 NLT). Sabbath reminds us that we belong because we are already accepted. Rest requires that we be who we are and nothing else. A life built upon Sabbath is contented because in rhythms of rest we discover our time is full of the holiness of God.

For two weeks at the cottage, we wake up late and sit in our pajamas under the spell of Round Lake and the distant call of

loons. Change into swimsuits when the sun takes her high and lofty place. Shower only when necessary, and walk to the store dripping wet and indulge in high-calorie snacks before dinner. Forget what day it is until asked, and only use mirrors for small glimpses of imperfection when the mood strikes. Self-doubt stays on the bedside table with our cell phones without service. We are only aware of time when the sun begins her descent and the breeze tickles the skin, signaling twilight and cocktails. Star-gazing for constellations, satellites, and shooting stars remains a mainstay on the bucket list in Canada, no matter how sleepy we are when someone notices the twinkling curtain overhead on a clear night of darkness. We watch, schooled by the mystery.

Surrounded by family members who accept immature mistakes and forgive the proclivities of childhood, we learn to relish our differences. And find new confidence in our identity.

I used to think a two-week vacation away from the crowds on the Internet was a necessary respite, a return to our hidden state. I thought our true selves emerged when cast away from life's busyness, but now I know differently. Our time at the cottage is a magnification of what true belonging looks like when we choose rest as a rhythm of life.

Even in the grasp of community, we can feel like misfits, with brief stints of warm belonging blowing through the open windows of our lives. But home is not a structure; it is a place that resides within each of us. We long for that place to be bigger than our experiences and without expectations about popularity or acceptance by the masses. We find that place of belonging while resting in what I have come to learn was God's intention from the beginning.



As I finish vacuuming under the dining room table, the sun descends, coloring every room in the house amber. Golden fingers creep through shutter slats and woo me to come out. I leave Christmas ornaments strewn in collections throughout the house, plastic

bins from the attic open and waiting. *One final walk around the neighborhood to soak up the Light will help me breathe*, I think. Every step becomes a prayer tug-of-war, a conversation of questions and answers between us.

Jesus, you have brought me to a place where belonging is absent. Because I believe you don't make mistakes, how can I feel peace in belonging, the same way I do at the lake—or the inner contentment I feel at Christmas, surrounded by family? How can I experience inner rest and a lack of loneliness that lasts for more than two weeks?

Sabbath. It's the word I hear rumble through my bantering. Pulling the zipper on my sweatshirt up to my neck, I walk up a hill a bit slower in contemplation.

Sabbath? Of course, why hadn't I thought of that?

Before Christmas, I had purchased *Wonderstruck*, written by my friend Margaret Feinberg. I savored a chapter every Sunday during my quiet time, but it was the fourth chapter, "A Sanctuary in Time: The Wonder of Rest," that haunted me most.

Margaret writes,

With rest, I noticed God-moments I might have missed before. My prayers grew clearer. Studying the Scripture became more meaningful. When life was rushed, I felt like I was reading a cookbook backward—nothing connected or made sense. Now I felt more attuned to God's voice in the Bible.

*Sometimes you have to slow to a stop and reset before you can experience divine presence. My hunger to know God increased as I learned to develop a healthy rhythm in life and rediscovered the wonder of rest.*³

She is describing how I feel when I'm on vacation at the cottage and on holiday surrounded by family, but can I really experience this every week? Remembering and keeping the Sabbath is a commandment, but perhaps I've viewed it as an elective, something to choose if and when the opportunity suits my schedule. Some

associate Sabbath as a day of guilt, a time for stifling fun, but this hasn't been my perspective while growing up. Honestly, it seems as if Sabbath might be a setup for disappointment like a New Year's Eve resolution of diet and exercise in order to achieve maximum health. Good intentions fueled by a hopeful clean slate will result in feeling like a failure if I cheat or stop prematurely. I need help and accountability.

Invite people to join you. The next thought pushes through the debate I am having with myself as I walk around our neighborhood. A man smoking a cigar passes me. We nod to each other, smile, and offer the typical polite southern wave. Cords from my earphones lay over my chest, but the music is turned off.

Yes! I can invite people to join me through my blog. Any discipline is easier to achieve with the encouragement and accountability of community. We can try this together as an experiment and see what happens.

When I return to a warm house, my cheeks are rosy—not because they are cold from my brisk walk but because God met me intimately, answering my longings, doubts, and questions with new perspective and holy anticipation.

“How was your walk?” H asks without moving his head away from a football game blaring through the television.

I tell him about newfound hope, my curiosity about Sabbath, and what I sense may be a new direction I am to take. He looks at me, nods in agreement, affirming I should do it.

As darkness descends and stars begin to twinkle, I place the Shabbat candlesticks on the granite island in the kitchen, a prominent place in the open floor plan of our house. Candles in the cups, I light each wick and watch the golden flames flicker in tandem with my heart pulsating peace. Unfinished projects remain on the dining room table, dirty dishes in the sink; the vacuum cleaner remains parked next to the bare Christmas tree. I sit down in the recliner, push it back, and prop up my feet. Closing my eyes, I exhale and welcome rest like a visitor unpacking a suitcase. Rest is staying for more than two weeks.

A few hours later, lounging in the same place in front of the television, surrounded by my family, sans a computer on my lap, I turn to H and chuckle.

“This is so hard for me,” I admit a bit sheepishly.

To-do lists scroll through my mind. A conveyor belt holding thank-you notes without addresses, an incomplete editorial calendar, emails awaiting responses, and blank lines on a grocery list, not to mention the plastic containers of Christmas tchotchkes.

“I know,” H affirms, “but this is good. It’s the first time you’ve been engaged with the family like this in a while.”

His honest admonition is a sobering reality check and confirmation resolving my inner conflict. A few hours of rest is not just for me but an allowance for overdue, uninterrupted presence with my family. *I don’t do guilt*. I can hear Geri saying it to me even though she is back in Phoenix.

Busyness can be avoidance instead of preparation. We’ve been busy with lots of things—running errands, decorating rooms, cleaning up messes, and cooking special food, all in preparation for receiving guests, celebrating Christmas, and making moments festive. *Everything* might be ready, but emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually, *we* are not. Ironically, busyness in the wrong things ultimately leaves us completely unprepared for what is most important. Choosing to leave practical things undone is a brave act of trust and relinquishment. And relinquishment often precedes the miracle. Advent is our example.

Advent is a season pregnant with hope and expectancy, weeks of preparation for contemplating and then receiving the miracle of Jesus’ birth. Advent welcomes the incarnation into every home of those who celebrate it, but along with it there is the tension about the choices we must make. Will busyness define how we wait for Jesus to come? Or will quiet contemplation be our sweet surrender while we wait? Similarly, Sabbath asks not “What will you give up for him?” but “How will you wait for him to come?”

Advent prepares us for the birth of Jesus, but also instills mindfulness about the second coming. And Sabbath, like the season

of Advent, allows us to wait with expectancy. Waiting can imply mindlessness, boredom, wasting time, passivity—even hopelessness. But in Hebrew to *wait* also means “to hope.”⁴ As we wait, God reveals his purpose in the preparation he is doing within us, and our hopeful outlook is the result. Sabbath invites Christ to come into our everyday life, to rethink priorities and celebrate his faithfulness. Sabbath is weekly preparation and anticipation for making space in our lives for Christ to come. Sabbath rhythms are generous gifts: they are not about guilt.

Busyness can also be a sign that trust is faltering and the fear of scarcity is taking over. Fear that there won’t be enough time to get everything done if we take a day off to rest. Exodus reminds us that when we obey the commandment of Sabbath rest and trust God with our time, he is faithful to provide what we need:

On the sixth day, they gathered twice as much as usual—four quarts for each person instead of two. Then all the leaders of the community came and asked Moses for an explanation. He told them, “This is what the Lord commanded: Tomorrow will be a day of complete rest, a holy Sabbath day set apart for the Lord. So bake or boil as much as you want today, and set aside what is left for tomorrow. So they put some aside until morning, just as Moses had commanded. And in the morning the leftover food was wholesome and good, without maggots or odor.

16:22–24 NLT

You know what happened when some of them tried to save a little manna just in case God didn’t come through on other days? The next morning the manna was full of maggots, smelling putrid.

On Saturday, I run last-minute errands, prepare a meal that will provide leftovers for Sunday dinner, and tidy up the house. When the sun goes down, whatever I haven’t finished stays undone for twenty-four hours. If I am tempted to fold one more load of clothes, clean the bathroom sink, apply another coat of paint to that piece of furniture, or answer those last few emails, I become

like the Israelites, compromising by making excuses that stink. A lack of faith in Sabbath reeks of self-sufficiency. And the fear of scarcity robs us of the miracle.

Moses warned the Israelites,

Eat this food today, for today is a Sabbath day dedicated to the Lord. There will be no food on the ground today. You may gather the food for six days, but the seventh day is the Sabbath. There will be no food on the ground that day.

Exodus 16:25–26 NLT

But they still didn't believe him. They went out searching anyway, and guess what? There was no manna. All that time looking, scavenging, searching for something to satiate their hunger, but they came back empty. "I observed everything going on under the sun, and really, it is all meaningless—like chasing the wind" (Ecclesiastes 1:14 NLT).

You must rely on yourself—this is the lie of scarcity that bullies us into thinking Sabbath is not realistic.

"[You] must realize that the Sabbath is the Lord's gift to you" (Exodus 16:29 NLT). He gave the Israelites a double portion so they would know that he is enough, and he will do the same for you.

For most of my life, Sunday ended up being a weaker version of the rest of the week. I took a nap or read a book after attending church, but I usually pulled back to "producing" after I had those few hours of rest—cleaning up whatever was left undone from the week. But Sabbath isn't about resting in order to be more productive. It isn't about me at all. One day a week, God asks us to "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy" (Exodus 20:8) because he knows how easily perspective can slant. That's what I tell my blog readers in the first week of January, and forty-two people sign up to practice Sabbath with me. Those who are skeptical but curious write to me first.



“So what’s the Sabbath Society entail? Give me the scoop!” My friend Michelle sends me an email from Nebraska with this simple question.

“OK, here’s the skinny,” I write back. “I decided to observe a true Sabbath and then began thinking about how any discipline is a bit easier when you have encouragement along the way. I know finding time to rest is hard and that’s why so many of us pass over it. I thought I would invite my readers to join me this year. I’ll send out an encouraging, honest email with some resource links about Sabbath every Friday morning. I will throw out a welcome mat and you’ll have a choice about replying to me personally, or not. The welcome mat is there regardless. No pressure, no jumping through hoops, no guilt. Just encouragement and affirmation that you don’t have to be alone in it if you don’t want to be.”

“This sounds awesome, Shelly! Sign me up—I need the encouragement!”



January 11, 2013

Hello Everyone,

I really wanted to do a personal email to each one of you because that is normally how I roll. But this is about Sabbath and keeping things simple as we make our way toward rest. So this is an inaugural email to welcome you to the Sabbath Society. I’m so glad you said, “I’m all in,” and decided to join me.

A few of you have asked questions about time commitment and what you need to do to be part of the group. My answer is: That is completely up to you.

My plan is to email you every Friday with some encouragement, some ideas that will make you think differently about Sabbath—at least that is my prayer. I’ll ask some questions about what works for you, what doesn’t work, and where

you are struggling . . . you get the picture. You are welcome to read the email without replying or reply to me personally (the icing on my cake). My hope is that we will encourage each other by our own successes and failures as we navigate Sabbath together.

This isn't about perfection or achieving sainthood. It's about linking arms, knowing that what we gain in the observance results in transformation as we focus on Peace. And that is the goal of this pilgrimage of faith, right?

And let me tell you, we'll have to fight for this time. Right now, I'm sitting down while dinner bakes in the oven. I'm hoping to tie the bow on two writing projects before sundown tomorrow. Life is full for all of us.

This is how I'm preparing for a successful Sabbath this week: I went grocery shopping last night for easy meals from sundown on Saturday to sundown on Sunday. This may not sound like a big deal, but I rarely grocery shop at night. I know some of you may choose another day; it doesn't matter.

I'm making a Crock-Pot meal on Saturday for dinner that will (hopefully) provide leftovers on Sunday. Unless they gobble it all up, in which case we'll order pizza.

I'm pre-scheduling my weekend blog post and turning off all social networking sites beginning at sundown tomorrow. This is harder than just flipping a switch or clicking on tabs to close them, let me tell you.

And I'm not doing anything that involves creating more work for me. No emails, no taking notes for a Bible study while I read, no writing blog posts, no grocery lists or organizing closets. So when I have a nudge to do something productive, I'm asking myself, "Is this necessary?" This takes some major restraint, and my husband is keeping me focused.

I'm not trying to create legalism. This is a discipline for me that will hopefully become a habit. What about you?

How will you approach Sabbath? There is no right or wrong answer here.

Until next week . . .

*Walking with you,
Shelly*



Responses pour in confirming we all struggle with the same issues when it comes to rest, but my friend Sherri sobers me the most when she writes back. For those who struggle with a lack of margin in life, Sabbath requires surrender and deeper trust.

With so much of my time consumed by work outside the home (full-time 9 to 5:30, then part-time from 6 to 10), Sunday and Monday are the only time I have to do housework, laundry, and catch up on regular responsibilities. Rest is a much needed luxury that I'm sad to say I haven't gotten much of lately. I've been doing housework on Sunday, and then I have somewhat of a rest day on Monday. However, since I began practicing "restful" Sabbaths, I've sort of swapped my days. My baby steps are taking a little time each evening to do a load of laundry so it isn't such a pile at the end of the week. Also, I've started to shop for groceries with recipes in mind that can be prepared ahead, or frozen even, then popped in the oven . . . baby steps.

Starting is the hardest part of any good intention toward creating new rhythms. We begin a little uncertain, doubting we'll be able to rest because of the work stacking up. But the more we plan the path and organize the journey, the more we will begin to walk our days *toward* Sabbath instead of away from it. And just like the Israelites, as we practice taking our hands off creation, we begin to believe God is trustworthy while we put faith into action.

The basis for making our days meaningful and filled with purpose comes with considering this question first: What and who are your priorities? If Jesus is top on the list, then this is a helpful exercise for making rhythms of rest a reality. Take a long look at your calendar from Wednesday to Wednesday with Sunday as the centerpiece, or the day you choose to Sabbath if Sunday doesn't work for you. Whatever day you choose to Sabbath, walk each of the four days beforehand toward a day of rest as the focal point so that preparing for Sabbath becomes the high priority among myriads of options. Instead of compartmentalizing rest, Sabbath becomes integrated as a lifestyle along with the people and circumstances that are most important. And if a whole day seems impossible, begin with a window of time that works for you.

Maybe Sunday is your day to rest but it often begins hectic, rushed, and results in a day that isn't peaceful. On Saturday, lay out children's clothes, put a meal in the Crock-Pot, tidy up the house, leave dishes in the sink at sundown, and use paper plates when you wake up. Baby steps.

Perhaps Sunday obligations make rest difficult. Find a window of time on another day of the week. Take a long prayer walk alone or with the dog, linger long in pajamas while savoring a cup of tea and journal random thoughts. Baby steps.

You work two jobs and fall asleep when you finally sit down? Take your lunch hour in a peaceful spot alone, once or a few times a week. Listen, write down what you hear, and practice adoration.

You may not have time for a whole day to rest, but a small window of time here and there cultivates a Sabbath heart. Pausing for prayerful listening, even for a few minutes, brings everything that is important back into focus. We need whitespace for hearing the truth more clearly.

Beginning is always the hardest part. Whatever time you choose to Sabbath, wipe the minutes clean of work. No answering emails, starting new projects, or ordering groceries online; no reorganizing drawers or polishing shoes. What brings you joy and peace and closer to the heart of God? Your answer will help to define what

rest looks like for you. Rhythms, unlike routines, bring intention toward our choices and order back from chaos. A life of intention ultimately leads to deep satisfaction.

A few weeks later, Michelle writes, “I love these emails, Shelly—thank you for taking the time to do this! As I was just doing my crunches (ow!), I thought, *I can’t wait for Shelly’s Sabbath email today!* and when I opened my in-box, it was there.”

Like Michelle, finding a rhythm of rest for me began with a bit of curiosity leading to further investigation about the truth. God began wooing me toward the epiphany of Sabbath as I embarked on that providential walk. Eight months later, on another summer vacation at the cottage, I arrived in Canada curious about the future and our livelihood. Once again, one simple word changed everything. Except this time, the word wasn’t as straightforward as *Sabbath*.