

Living Integration Reflection

“Misbehaving” on Sabbath

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ABSTRACT: In this living integration, the author reflects on how a series of trials became a journey to Sabbath and how that journey was transformative in her life. A personal perspective is shared, consisting of life events that led the author to consider Sabbath as a lifestyle that remembers God, looks to Jesus, and is intentionally non-conformist, or “misbehaves” according to the world’s standards. For this author, the journey to consider Sabbath transformed a professional crisis into a place of healing, restoration, and a deeper relationship with Christ.

Key words: Sabbath, journey, remember/remembering [God], rest, living [lifestyle], stop/stopping,[relinquishing] control [to God], transform [transformation, transformative], grace

INTRODUCTION

God called me to care about Sabbath when I felt I could least afford to spend the time thinking about it or living it, which was precisely the time I needed to incorporate Sabbath into my life. In this living integration reflection I will share how Sabbath became real to me during significant professional trials and how a personalized license plate “2MZBHAV” reflects what I have come to believe about Sabbath. The license plate is not only my nickname (Ms. B. Haven), but as a play on words, it represents my views about mindset and the meaning of Sabbath. “Misbehaving” on Sabbath reflects my point of view that Sabbath is practiced in the midst of my weakness and God’s grace. “Misbehaving” represents non-conformity to the world’s expectations of over-work, busyness, and putting self-care last. “Misbehaving” (Ms. B. Haven) on Sabbath (this reflection) reveals my personal journey into understanding and living God’s command to remember Sabbath.

MY JOURNEY TO SABBATH

My journey to Sabbath is about a series of trials: a car accident, a stressful transition back to teaching, and the biggest professional trauma of my life. God used each of these to teach me about Sabbath. The professional trauma was my experience of being fired when I was at the top of my professional game. The stressful transition back to teaching included being overwhelmed with multiple new

course preps. And the car accident was just “icing on the cake” on my birthday. But God does have perfect timing, and he used these challenges to reveal himself to me and help me grow deeper in my relationship with him. He also demanded that I begin living in Sabbath.

The car accident, third in the series, is mentioned only for the sassy license plate (2MZBHAV) that resulted on the new (used) sports car because it symbolizes my attitude about the professional wreck and reminds me of my theology about Sabbath. God helped me emerge from the professional ordeal fully dependent on him and non-conformant to the world’s standards or expectations. The world expected me to fight when God told me to rest in him. The world told me to hold on to resentment while God instructed me to forgive and let go. The world’s way was to prove myself through finding a bigger, better job, but God told me to wait and trust. The sassy license plate reminds me “to misbehave” (2MZBHAV) and refuse to comply with the world’s expectations.

The professional collision involves a longer journey to a place of higher spiritual growth and understanding through experiencing significant trials. I had been a professor for 23 years, ten of those years as an academic dean accustomed to positive affirmation, accomplishment, and advancement, when at the height of success, things began to fall apart. My work environment became negative and hostile. I felt the professional boundaries slipping into a place where my principles were violated. I was unaccustomed to professional conflict and struggled to find coping strategies and ways to understand what was happening, to the point of seeking release from God to leave my

position. But God clearly told me “no” through Psalm 16: “The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage” (Psalm 16:5-6, NRSV). To me this scripture meant that I was to trust God with my future and that he promised to take care of me in the midst of a difficult workplace. I continued in my role as academic dean, but conflicting approaches to leadership and resource management increasingly became a source of tension. I was fired from my administrative position and asked to return to full-time teaching which I loved, but the change was a demotion and felt like failure.

Throughout this time of tribulation, God gave me a Scripture from Romans 5 as an encouragement and a promise:

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. (Romans 5:1-5, NRSV)

This Scripture prepared my heart for what was to become for me a key part of the meaning of Sabbath: to relinquish everything to God in trust. The transition back to full-time teaching took several months. During this time, I was uncertain about my future, and I experienced the most intense pain and rejection of my professional life. But at the same time, I also received a huge outpouring of support from those who had formerly reported to me as dean and from numerous colleagues and professional peers. I did not walk through the dark days alone. God walked with me and sent Jesus “with skin on” in a hundred ways. Many of these moments with colleagues became moments of Sabbath. God took my struggles and replaced them with moments of grace.

THE MEANING OF SABBATH

Living A Sabbath Lifestyle

What I have come to believe about keeping Sabbath is that I am called to live a Sabbath lifestyle. How I practice Sabbath is evolving over time, and if I continue listening to God, I’m confident that “Sabbath living” will become

more all-encompassing and take over more and more of my life. Right now it means that I am called to stop, take a breath, listen to God, and think about God on a daily basis. I believe God wants me to stop several times throughout my day and recognize his presence. I am sure that God wants me to “pray without ceasing” and to live in constant acknowledgement of him. The Sabbath part comes into play as I intentionally take “breaks” throughout my day to remember that God is with me, stop and clear my mind, take a breath, and listen to God, even for a few moments. I am less concerned about the exact amount of time or how many breaks I take throughout the day, and I’m more interested in living out the spirit of Sabbath. That’s why I think practices are so important. If we can make some of our moments of “stopping out” habitual, then I think it reminds us to honor Sabbath. The caution as we add some habits and routine to our lives is to make sure they do not become legalistic but that they remain intentional, thoughtful, and meaningful.

My journey to find and practice Sabbath has been imperfect. But as 2 Corinthians 12:9 reminds us, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (NRSV). Even my Sabbath practices in their imperfection are bathed in the grace of God.

Remembering God

During the most painful time of transition, God asked me to trust him, relinquish everything, give him control, and remember that he is God. When my time was stretched thin and I had no time to give, that is precisely when God asked me to take time for him. This became to me the meaning of Sabbath. God asked me to stop and remember that he is with me.

Exodus 20:8 reads, “Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy” (NRSV). Keeping the Sabbath holy involves more than rest or not working. In an article reviewing the Jewish history of Sabbath keeping, Sharon Ayala (2012) says, “True ‘rest’ is about truly giving up control” (p. 19). In the Jewish tradition this meant one day each week, and Jewish law about Shabbat (Sabbath) specifies hundreds of rules (Ayala, 2012, p. 18). Christians reinterpreted the legalistic view of Sabbath based on observing Jesus healing the sick and performing his ministry on the Sabbath day. Some Christian faith traditions believe that Jesus’ actions abolished the Sabbath, while others believe that Christians should not work or buy things on Sabbath, which is Sunday in most faith traditions (Ayala, 2012, pp. 20-21). But over time, as American culture has become more consumer-driven and the pressure to work 24-7 has

increased, some Christians are realizing that we have lost not only the belief about what we should and should not do on Sabbath, but we have lost even the spirit of the law to keep Sabbath. What I have discovered is that in my journey to obey God's call to think about Sabbath, my revelations about Sabbath-keeping align with the spirit of both a Jewish interpretation and Jesus' ministry. I have come to understand that when we stop to remember Sabbath, we stop to remember that God is God.

Busyness is the way the world affirms my importance, but by feeding my ego and pride, it puts me at the center of my life instead of God and removes my need for God. The belief that I am in charge leads me to subconsciously take over the role of God. If I am in full control of everything in my life, then there is no place for God. Sabbath helps me stop and focus my attention on God and remember who God is and that he is in control.

The posture God calls me to take in Sabbath is represented by God's voice to me while on a daily walk to listen and pray at the lowest point in my professional life (Cosio, 2007, pp. 43-44). I clearly heard God tell me to "kneel at the cross." At a point when the world would tell me to resist, God said "kneel down. Turn to me; give everything to me; let me take control of everything; trust me with it." God helped me realize that in a conflict, it doesn't matter to God who is right or wrong; God's purpose is always healing for both parties and to bring freedom out of brokenness (Young, 2007, p. 191). God's promise is to heal, forgive, cleanse, and redeem — resulting in peace and restoration. When we honor Sabbath, we honor God as God.

Looking To Jesus

One of the most helpful Sabbath practices I have experienced is to keep fixing my eyes on Jesus to see how he does it, or look to Jesus for the "how to" on Sabbath. In Matthew 11:28-29, Jesus says, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (NRSV). For this same passage *The Message* says:

Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me — watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly. (Matthew 11:28-29, MSG)

In these verses, Jesus "offers himself as our resting place" (Kun, 1991). Sabbath leads us to a relationship with Christ, and all roads to Sabbath direct me to kneel at the cross and give God complete control. This verse reminds me that Jesus is the way to find Sabbath rest and that we will learn to live freely and lightly if we give up our ego and control and submit to God's ways as opposed to our own. Jesus will carry our burdens when we follow him and live in relationship with him.

We know that Jesus came to reveal God and that God defined Sabbath after his work of creation. On the first Sabbath day, God rested and celebrated his work (Welch, 2013). In the creation narrative, God observed that his work in creation was good (Genesis 1), and after God created humankind, Genesis 1:31 tells us, "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good" (NRSV). It was after the "good work" of God's creation that God rested and blessed the seventh day and made it holy.

And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation. (Genesis 2:2-3, NRSV)

The first thing God sanctified after his creation was time. God's observance of the first Sabbath signified wholeness, fruitfulness, and fullness of life as he celebrated the creation. God created Sabbath for the people of God to remember that they entered a covenant relationship with him. "Sabbath tells us something significant about God" (Welch, 2013).

Exodus 16:29 tells us that "the Sabbath is the Lord's gift to you" (NLT). Consecrating our time to God in Sabbath changes us and transforms our approach to work. When balanced with rest and given to God, our work becomes purposeful and worshipful. Sabbath is not merely the absence of work, but it is about stopping to reflect and celebrate our work, and it helps us find greater meaning in the time we spend working.

Wayne Muller (1999) describes it this way:

Sabbath is more than the absence of work; ... it is the presence of something that arises when we consecrate a period of time to listen to what is most deeply beautiful, nourishing, or true.... Sabbath time is not spiritually superior to our work. The practice is rather to find that balance point at which, having rested, we do our work with greater ease and joy, and bring healing and delight to our endeavors. (p. 8)

As Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:28), Jesus' work was a loving and caring, healing ministry. Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27, NRSV). When I realize that God made Sabbath for me — to nourish body and soul — I realize that Sabbath can have a transforming power over my outlook on life, not only my rest, but my work as well. God's creation and Jesus' example show us that remembering Sabbath transforms our whole life, both our work and rest, which helps us do both of them more purposefully in worship to God. Looking to Jesus helps me realize that both my work and rest are blessed and holy, and they are both acts of worship.

Psalms 91:1 says, "Those who live in the shelter of the Most High will find rest in the shadow of the Almighty" (NLT). Isaiah 40:31 tells us that "those who trust in the LORD will find new strength. They will soar high on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not faint" (NLT). God himself becomes our dwelling place as we rest in him. Similarly, Jesus describes himself as the vine, and in John 15:4, Jesus says, "Abide in me as I abide in you" (NRSV), or from the Jerusalem Bible, "Make your home in me" (John 15:4). Just as God becomes our dwelling place, Jesus becomes our home as we rest in him (Kun, 1991). Sabbath is a time to experience this refuge and refreshment and rest. Wayne Muller (1999) says, "The practice of Sabbath is like the practice of taking refuge" (p. 9). Living in Sabbath enables us to live victoriously in peace and freedom as we commit, trust, delight, and rest in God (Psalms 37; Lee & Lee, 1971). "If you call the Sabbath a delight ... then you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth" (Isaiah 58:13-14, NRSV).

"Misbehaving": Saying No To The World

It is a badge of honor to be busy, to be in demand, and to have people who need me constantly. But ego leading to perfectionism and the need for control is one of the surest ways to burnout, and it does not honor Sabbath nor does it recognize God as the ultimate authority. Honoring Sabbath is "misbehaving" in the sense that it says no to the world's expectations of over-work, over-consumption, and over-busyness.

A passage from Wayne Muller's book (1999), *Sabbath*, convicted me:

In the relentless busyness of modern life, we have lost the rhythm between work and rest.... Our culture invariably supposes that action and accomplishment are better than rest.... Because we do

not rest, we lose our way.... We miss the quiet that would give us wisdom.... To be unavailable to our friends and family, to be unable to find time for the sunset ... to whiz through our obligations without time for a single, mindful breath, this has become the model of a successful life. (pp. 1-2)

Ecclesiastes 4:6 says, "Better is one hand full of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind." In American consumer culture today, we strive after material things and we "make war on" our financial health as we incur debt to acquire things; we "make war on" our time as we spend it shopping, storing, organizing, cleaning, and dealing with clutter. This material clutter clutters our minds as well as our physical spaces as it adds chaos to our lives and crowds out calm and quietness. The barrage of stuff robs us of time for quiet, rest and reflection. How can we hear God's voice if we have no time to be quiet and listen?

Sabbath allows us to challenge this war on ourselves. Gaining more simplicity in our environments and taking time to think and rest allows us to be more productive when we do work, but more importantly, it can meet our fundamental human need for renewal and meaning. Wayne Muller (1999) says:

Sabbath can be a revolutionary challenge to the violence of overwork, mindless accumulation, and the endless multiplication of desires, responsibilities, and accomplishments.... We must have a period in which we lie fallow and restore our souls. Within this sanctuary, we become available to the insights and blessings of deep mindfulness that arise only in stillness and time. If we do not surrender into some kind of Sabbath, how can we find our way, how can we hear the voices that tell us the right thing to do? (pp. 6-7)

The world tells us to be guilty for "doing nothing." But Sabbath reminds us that we need time to care for the needs of our body and soul, and in so doing, it allows us to find meaning and our way toward God. Sabbath clears away the clutter enough so we can hear God speak.

A LIFE TRANSFORMED BY SABBATH

Practicing Sabbath has changed me. What started with a professional crisis, a sassy license plate, and a call to honor Sabbath when I needed it most, has become a continuing journey toward stopping and listening to

God, recognizing God at work in every aspect of my life, particularly in the most difficult circumstances, and giving God complete control over everything in my life. This is a journey in “misbehaving” that pushes against the world’s expectations and is bathed in God’s grace. My journey resonates with Wayne Muller (1999) in his book, *Sabbath*, when he says, “The greatest lesson I have learned is about surrender.... I am willing to be stopped. I owe my life to the simple act of rest” (p. 20).

While this journey will always be ongoing and my attempt to “do” Sabbath will always be evolving. For me, it has changed a professional crisis into a deeper call to follow Christ. It has helped me recognize that God’s ultimate desire for all — those who wound and those who receive wounding — is to be healed and forgiven. The journey to Sabbath has helped me give up the pain of the past and accept God’s complete healing and restoration.

In *Jesus Calling*, Sarah Young (2004) says:

If you learn to trust Me — really trust Me — with your whole being, then nothing can separate you from My Peace. Everything you endure can be put to good use by allowing it to train you in trusting Me. This is how you foil the works of evil, growing in grace through the very adversity that was meant to harm you. Joseph was a prime example of this divine reversal, declaring to his brothers: “*You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.*” (p. 134; Genesis 50:20)

God takes the failures, the stress, and the weaknesses of our lives and uses them to turn us toward him. He has done that for me in my journey toward remembering Sabbath. That journey has taken me closer to God.

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