

## BOOK REVIEW

### ***SABBATH: RESTORING THE SACRED RHYTHM OF REST* BY WAYNE MULLER**

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Sabbath. The concept is all too often foreign in today's frenzied world. I have never been one to unplug from the demands around me to take intentional time out for rest and relaxation. My experience in higher education leads me to believe that many of my faculty colleagues can relate to my plight. This past fall semester, after an especially demanding summer term, I asked a faculty colleague if she would hold me accountable for maintaining a healthier work/life balance. She asked me if I had ever heard of the book: *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest* (Muller, 1999). At the mention of this title, I immediately remembered receiving a copy of this book as a gift from my mother several years prior. I vowed to find the book and read it seriously.

It required a concerted effort to locate the book; it had been pushed to the back of a dusty bookshelf, only partially read, many years ago. When I finally found the book and opened the cover, I read the message my mother had written inside it on Christmas Day 1999. She knew then how much I needed to take the lessons of *Sabbath* (Muller, 1999) to heart. Here it was, 10 years later, and I had still not learned these lessons. As I began to read the introductory chapter, I found myself highlighting almost every line. I knew I had stumbled upon a truth I had been sorely missing. Since reading and re-reading the book, I am still working to digest the many lessons it conveys. I understand that restoring the rhythm of rest will be a life-long journey, but I am thankful that it is a journey I have now begun. My hope

is that this book review will inspire others to read *Sabbath* (Muller, 1999), but more importantly, to go beyond reading the book to practicing the art of disconnecting from the harried world, carving out sanctuaries of silence, and connecting fully with our Creator.

The thesis of *Sabbath* is "a plea for Sabbath-keeping" (Muller, 1999, p. 10). Sabbath refers to a specific practice, but it is also used as a metaphor for sacred rest. The plea for Sabbath-keeping is only in part for ourselves. It is also for all those whose lives we touch. For "rested and refreshed, we more generously serve all those who need our care" (p. 11). An overriding message throughout the book is that we are called to rest. Observing Sabbath is not merely a suggestion; it is a commandment. Failure to keep this commandment causes us to lose our way as we become disconnected from the insights that are born only within the context of stillness. Practicing Sabbath affords us the nourishment we need to live lives of deep meaning and service.

*Sabbath* (Muller, 1999) is organized into several sections: Remember the Sabbath, Rest, Rhythm, Time, Happiness, Wisdom, Consecration, and A Sabbath Day. In the first section, Remember the Sabbath, Muller (1999) lays the groundwork for the importance of what he refers to as Sabbath-keeping. He writes about well-meaning people who over-commit themselves to the point of burnout and ineffectiveness. He comments on the world's definition of a successful life. He cautions us that "unceasing determination

and tireless effort” (p. 1) endanger our fulfillment of all we were meant to be. In the section on Rest, Muller uses Jesus as a model of someone who knew how to draw boundaries and seek rest.

*Jesus did not wait until everyone had been properly cared for; until all who sought him were healed. He did not ask permission to go, nor did he leave anyone behind “on call,” or even let his disciples know where he was going. Jesus obeyed a deeper rhythm. When the moment for rest had come, the time for healing was over. He would simply stop, retire to a quiet place, and pray. (p. 25)*

Resting in the midst of our busyness is a novel idea. Many of us are hesitant to observe Sabbath because of our drive to constantly be productive. Yet, when we think deeply about it, I believe we must concur with Muller (1999) that at some point our over-zealous productiveness becomes counterproductive. We lose our edge for effectiveness if we never take time for renewal. I am reminded of Stephen Covey’s seventh habit: sharpening the saw (Covey, 1990). While rest and accomplishment may initially appear to be mutually exclusive concepts, we must be rested to maximize accomplishment. Furthermore, if we wait to rest until we are finished with everything we have to accomplish, we will never rest. Yes, we must learn to rest in the midst of our busyness. In today’s non-stop world, the only alternative is no rest at all.

In the section on Rhythm, Muller (1999) speaks to the fact that “Sabbath requires surrender” (p. 82). Sabbath “liberates us from the need to be finished” (p. 83).

*The old, wise Sabbath says: Stop now. As the sun touches the horizon, take the hand off the plow, put down the phone, let the pen rest on the paper, turn off the computer, leave the mop in the bucket and the car in the drive. There is no room for negotiation, no time to be seduced by the urgency of our responsibilities. We stop because there are forces larger than we that take care of the universe, and while our efforts are important, necessary, and useful, they are not (nor are we)*

*indispensable. The galaxy will somehow manage without us for this hour, this day, and so we are invited — nay, commanded — to relax, and enjoy our relative unimportance, our humble place at the table in a very large world. The deep wisdom embedded in creation will take care of things for a while. (Muller, 1999, p. 83)*

The section on Wisdom teaches that “Sabbath is a time when we retreat from the illusion of our own indispensability” (p. 175). The world misleads us into believing that success depends on constant efforts toward accomplishment. How incredibly freeing it is to recognize the fallacy in this message and answer God’s call to surrender.

Throughout the book, Muller (1999) suggests dozens of ways of observing Sabbath. Some are elaborate, time-consuming practices, while others are momentary observances that may be incorporated into one’s life throughout the course of a typical day. Some of the suggested practices for Sabbath-keeping are as follows:

- Choose a heavily used appliance such as the telephone, computer, or television, and let it rest for a specified period of time whether it be for an hour or an entire weekend. The idea is to commit to not using this appliance, to enjoy the time you will have without its disturbance, and to reflect on how it feels to be disconnected from it.
- Practice “guerilla compassion” (p. 41) by offering silent prayers for those people you come across in your daily activities (e.g., people in line at the grocery store, people in an adjacent lane at a stoplight, people walking across campus, etc.). Pray silently and secretly, blessing those with whom you cross paths in your comings and goings. As you offer a blessing, experience it for yourself. Such blessings will create Sabbath moments.
- Choose a time to be deliberately silent. Savor the silence, and listen for the still, small voice from within.
- Create a “Sabbath box” (p. 60). For a pre-determined amount of time, place things in

the box that you do not want to use or worry about. You might put your laptop in the box, or perhaps your calendar. Also consider listing things that you are worried about, and place the list in the box, relinquishing your concerns to God. Surrender these items and the thoughts that surround them, and delight in the freedom that results.

- Set a time aside to go out and revel in the gift of creation. Connect with the earth at a deep level. Resolve yourself to take in the sights, sounds, and smells. Let the mountains and valleys put your concerns in perspective as you focus on God's handiwork. Be silent and let the marvels of the universe nurture your soul.
- Think of prayer as a "portable Sabbath" (p. 86), a Sabbath that you can practice anywhere, any time. Close your eyes and let your mind rest in your heart.
- Make a space for an altar in your home. It can be simple, merely a place where you can go to disconnect from the world and connect with the Creator. Consider decorating the altar with sacred objects or things that hold special meaning to you. Include a candle for lighting during meditation or prayer. Make this your "Sabbath place," and visit it often.
- Practice "Sloth Yoga" (p. 139), an exercise whereby you practice the "fruitful uselessness" of rest and play. Do nothing of significance with reckless abandon, without guilt, with pure enjoyment and delight.
- When you have a problem that concerns you, turn it over to God before you retire for the evening. Muller (1999) suggests:

*Imagine there are forces at work that are already healing what needs to be healed; it only requires your surrender. Let it be... When you awaken in the morning, look at the problem again, and see what has grown there, quietly, invisibly in the night. (p. 170)*

These are only a few of the many recommended Sabbath-keeping practices. Readers are encouraged to try those most appealing to them, modifying them as they like — ultimately creating their own expressions of Sabbath that richly nourish their bodies, minds, hearts, and souls.

I believe that *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest* (Muller, 1999) has the potential to be a life-changing book for readers willing to embrace its thesis of Sabbath-keeping. I highly recommend this book to all who are weary and heavy laden. God commanded us to keep the Sabbath and, when we do, He will grant us the life-giving rest that restores us and equips us to be the light of the world.

## REFERENCES

Covey, S. R. (1990). *The 7 habits of highly effective people*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Muller, W. (1999). *Sabbath: Restoring the sacred rhythm of rest*. New York, NY: Bantam Books.

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