

Beyond the Question: Part One
By May Sarton

The phoebe sits on her nest
Hour after hour,
Day after day,
Waiting for life to burst out
From under her warmth.
Can I weave a nest for silence,
Weave it of listening,
Listening,
Layer upon layer?
But one must first become small,
Nothing but a presence,
Attentive as a nesting bird,
Proffering no slightest wish
Toward anything that might happen
Or be given,
Only the warm, faithful waiting,
Contained in one's smallness.
Beyond the question, the silence.
Before the answer, the silence.

First Lesson
Phillip Booth

Lie back, Daughter, let your head
Be tipped back in the cup of my hand.
Gently, I will hold you. Spread your arms
Wide, lie out on the stream and look high at the gulls.
A dead-man's float is face down. You will dive
And swim soon enough where this tidewater
Ebbs to the sea. Daughter, believe
Me, when you tire on your long swim
To your island, lie up and survive.
As you float now, where I hold you
And let go, remember when fear
Cramps your heart, what I told you:
Lie gently and wide to the light-year stars,
Lie back and the sea will hold you.

Gentle Sabbath

According to the Book of Genesis, God created the entire universe, the light and the darkness, the stars and planets and moons that make up all the galaxies, and God created the sky and water and land, and every creature that flies and swims, and God created the trees and every plant and every animal, the birds and mice and snakes and humans. And when God was done, God, that omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient Being, rested. The One who could do all things, who knew all things, the greatest power of all, rested. God took a day off. It's called the Sabbath Day.

All the Abrahamic traditions begin with this same series of events. It's an interesting way to start the story of cosmic and human history. The creation of Everything. And then the day of rest. Work, work, work. Rest.

Sabbath is one of the Ten Commandments and considered a perpetual covenant with God. We will work. And we will rest. Whoever you are, regardless of how important you think you are or how worthless others might perceive you, you are required to take a break for one day.

As someone who is always going, I'm fascinated by this insistence on rest. To be completely honest, I'm not good at it. In June, John Cavallero, our past Director of Religious Education, asked me what I was planning to do during my vacation in July. I told him for two weeks of that vacation time, my plan was to do absolutely nothing. To sit on my deck and listen to the trees for hours on end. He laughed and told me he couldn't imagine me sitting still for that long. I assured him my ability to do nothing would astound him. I'm glad he's not here this year so I don't have to confess, I ended up working for those two weeks. I got so excited about the Climate March and got involved with the planning of that on the national stage and there was a lot going on here with many of you, so I skipped most of my vacation this year. I enjoyed my summer very, very much. But I didn't sit still as I had planned. Sometimes for me, life is too exciting, there are so many wonderful things to do and so many people I love, it's difficult to prioritize relaxing.

I imagine I'm not alone in my lack of down time. It's the nature of a 21st century life. It seems like the soundtrack we have running in the background: "I'm sorry I'm late." "I have to leave early." "I wish I could but I'm already scheduled." It isn't that all the things we do aren't wonderful; I hope we love the many ways we spend our time and all the people with whom we are so busy. I know I do. I know that's at the core of my challenge.

But regardless of how much we enjoy the busyness, the Sabbath is gone. Let's, for our brief time this morning, enjoy some Sabbath time. For just a little while, let's all try to rest. Once the service is over, we'll start getting ready for the big Midnight Run meeting and a bunch of folks are going to get the garden beds ready for the winter and there will be cleaning and planning and organizing, but for this moment, let's clear our heads, settle into our chairs, and rest. For as long as I'm talking, there is nothing to do. Your minds can wander, your eyes might find respite on the woods behind me. You might want to hear the sound of my voice without letting the words penetrate, letting go of meaning, just being present to sound. For these few minutes, you can sit with no one pulling on you, nothing to see to and nothing to mind. For just a little while, you can let all the little sparks in your brain shut off.

I don't know what replenishes you. I can feel renewed many different ways. Long periods of silence. Not meditation, necessarily; just time without words. Sometimes I let my head go, let it think all the thoughts I haven't had time for. Sometimes, my head stops altogether and there are no words. Just the peace of the emptiness. On the other hand, music or live performance can sometimes give me a sense of renewed spirit. Good poetry can make me come alive again too. If a poem is good, I want it read over and over again. It becomes music of my spirit or a bath in which I can soak sometimes for hours. There are times I bring something here I love so much, after offering a reading I want to say "Is it OK if I read that again?" I want us to rest in the language; I want to offer the opportunity for all of us to soak in it, to let the poetry become music for all of our spirits.

I live in the woods. The woods provide a different kind of poetry and offer rest and replenishment year round. If I'm inside, I see trees from every window. There are 5 skylights in my house, which means at any given time, I can look up and see the sky and the tops of the trees and birds in their nests and bees trying to get in. When I walk in the woods at this time of year, there's a constant falling of leaves, a showering of color. Beneath my feet there's a bed of leaves both fresh and those that have been there for many years, slowly decaying in layers. I breathe the autumn air and hear the ground crunching beneath the squirrels scurrying behind me as they bury their acorns in preparation for winter. We have a rafter of turkeys on our property who bring me great joy when they saunter through. The chipmunks get busy this time of year too, but they've also learned to keep a low profile when the hawks glide through the woods slowly and silently, massive wings outstretched. The mice know to keep low, but the chipmunks are prone to losing themselves in play. There are days I remember to pay attention, days I am present to the glory of the day when I can see all these things. And there are days when my head is buried in a computer.

Friday is my day off. Thursday is when I pick up our share at the farm about 3 miles from my house. I bring the food home on Thursday and put it in the fridge. Fridays I behave like the squirrel. I cut the swiss chard and spinach and kale and escarole and blanche and dry and freeze them. I boil the corn and cut it from the cob and roast the tomatoes and get them in the freezer too along with the onions, potatoes and carrots. The apples are peeled and crushed with cinnamon and allspice and jarred for mid-winter lunch boxes and I scoop the seeds out

of the many different squashes and salt and roast them for snacks. And when I'm done, I use some of what's left to make dinner. This Friday it was garlic and eggplant soup with crunchy chick peas.

This might sound like a lot of work to some of you, but for me, it's a day of rest. It's how I prepare for winter and take care of my family and live gently on our fragile planet. It's how I connect with my love for Earth and the people she and I feed together.

As much as I love that time to myself, that time to connect with Earth and her bounty, there is something even more precious to me during my Sabbath time. Stillness. Stillness is a gift. It's a privilege and for some of us, it's rare. Stillness is more than having nothing to do. I have been unemployed and that is not stillness. Enforced idleness can create great anxiety and a sense of displacement, of not belonging. I'm not talking about the empty space of grief or loneliness either. That's not Sabbath time. That's intense internal work.

Stillness is a gift because it means we can be free from that, if only for a short time. Free from the work of our lives, whatever that is. There was a time in my life, I'd end every day sitting for 30 minutes. I had a chair in my room that was perfectly comfortable. Before bed, I'd sit in the chair and let the silence come. For that to happen, I'd consider my day. I'd go over my conversations wondering if I'd hurt anyone or if I'd said or done something I needed to un-say or un-do the next day. I'd consider my accomplishments and recognize where I'd done well. And then the silence would come. I could slip into a warm, safe space. My head was clear and I could enjoy a time of emptiness.

That isn't the same as a Sabbath day, but it's a similar practice. It's a time for rest. A little bit each day, a little bit each week. When David was the minister here, he had a rule that there could be no meetings or work-talk on Sunday mornings. This is the Sabbath day, he said, and we will keep it sacred. When I arrived, or even before that, I suspect, when Jef the interim arrived, you all made it clear that Sundays really are the best time to take care of congregational business and if it's not done on Sunday, it may not be done at all. I respect that and don't want to make life more difficult than it has to be, so Sundays are a busy day here. But how lovely it would be if you could all come here just to rest. What if Sunday was a Sabbath Day? What if, one day a week, we didn't answer phone calls or send texts or tweets. What if one day a week we paid deep attention to the person in front of us, to our spouse or friend or child or neighbor or the stranger who has stumbled into our path. What if for one day, we could be fully present to whatever or whomever is before us.

My great grandmother was an Orthodox Jew. On the Sabbath – sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday – she didn't work or cause to work. She walked to wherever she was going, she ate food and served food she prepared the night before and that sat on the counter waiting for her. She walked up stairs rather than take an elevator and didn't turn on lights or radios or anything else that would create work somewhere in the system. Of course, she lived on the Lower East Side and all the stores were closed and everyone was on the street walking and talking with each other. Her entire neighborhood supported the idea that Saturday was a day off for everyone from everything. You went to Synagogue and prayed and sang and walked to the park where you talked with your neighbors.

It's different in a culture like ours that doesn't stop. Sabbath becomes inconvenient. I remember learning that my cousins, who belonged to a congregation some distance from their home, would take a cab on Saturday mornings that would drop them off about 15 blocks from synagogue so that no one would see that they didn't walk the whole way. Of course, that has nothing to do with my idea of Sabbath. In fact, I suspect it's rules and social pressure like that that shifted so many of us away from a Sabbath day altogether. Or it might be our commitment to a growing economy that requires more and more from workers and consumers to keep the system ever-enlarging.

Regardless of convenience or external pressures, rest is necessary. I believe we live in a broken and hurting world. We need all hands on deck if we are going to heal the fragmentation...And if we're going to do that, we need to be healed and whole people ourselves. We need a day every week to be replenished. One day to see and be seen, one day to be silent or read poetry or walk in the woods or visit a farm or wander through a museum or read a novel or play with a puppy or even one day to think all the thoughts you need to think.

What would it be like to lie back into a Sabbath day? To float in it on your back, as if you are in the Caribbean ocean. Blue and fresh and warm, holding you up. Let your head rest on the water like a pillow. The waves gently lift and drop you, rocking you back and forth. Your muscles let go of the outside world. Your ears, below the water line, can hear only the ocean. You breath the warm air which fills your lungs, bringing the peace of rest as oxygen to your blood. What if we let go once a week and floated free in the Sabbath?

Take a deep breath. It is here. It is now. This is our Sabbath day. The busyness of the world will rush in again soon. I'm almost at the end of this sermon and we'll stand and sing and the microphone will be passed and words will fill the room and once we blow out the chalice, tables will be set up and chairs moved and it will be a glorious window into the chaos of love as we prepare for meetings and take out calendars and do the work that is our lives. Rest is rare. It is here now for another few moments. Take a deep breath. A Sabbath breath.

And consider for a moment whether you can create a Sabbath day for yourselves. Is there a way to carve out a little time for silence or poetry or walking or cooking or writing or playing or reading or running or dancing? Is there a way to empty a little time each week? A little time to mend the tiny tears that happen in the busyness? A little time to let go of expectations and anger and anxiety and ambition.

I'm about to end. Your mind will have to return from its wandering. But let's remember the necessity of the Sabbath, the deep need we have to be still, to lean into silence, to let rest become an ocean that we float on freely. Let's each try to remember that the lesson the ancient peoples are telling us in that creation story is that, no matter how great the work, the Sabbath is part of the package, part of the process of creating. If we are to bring life, we are also to bring rest.