



Making Space for Sabbath in our Lives

A recent article in Maclean's Magazine reported on a study on longevity. What is the secret for a long life? The article summarizes the results of years of scientific research on this question and ends with nine hints for a longer, healthier life. What should we be doing to live longer and healthier? The study suggests the following:

- * Add simple activities to your day like walking farther than you need to, doing gardening or home repairs yourself or running around with your children or pets.
- * Try eating off smaller plates to decrease your portion sizes and reduce calories.
- * Limit the number of servings of meat you eat in a week.
- * Drink a glass or two of red wine most evenings.
- * Know your passions in life and take time to enjoy them most days.
- * Take quiet time to relieve stress.
- * Belong to a spiritual community and gather with them regularly.
- * Make your family and your loved ones a priority. Express that through your actions.
- * Surround yourself with friends who have healthy habits and support you in your goals.

What is interesting about this list is that it expresses many of the challenges contained in the notion of the Sabbath. Scripture opens with the story of creation. God, we are told, made the world in six days, rested on the seventh, the Sabbath and declared this day to be forever a day of rest.

There is a spirituality of time, work and rest contained in that. According to the theology of the Sabbath, there is to be a fixed rhythm for our days: We are meant to work for six days and then have a one-day sabbatical; work for six years and then have a one-year sabbatical; and, finally, work for a lifetime and have an eternity of sabbatical, an eternity of resting in God.

Former generations, I believe, took this more seriously than we do today. Remember to keep holy the Sabbath day. Until recently it was clearer that this is a commandment, not simply a lifestyle suggestion. Sabbath, until recent generations, was a day where ordinary life and ordinary activity were supplanted by a different sense of time and activity.

What is Sabbath meant to be?

For an observant Jew, Sabbath means that the normal workday is suspended and replaced by a special time of prayer, family, celebration, leisure and enjoyment. In the Jewish spirituality, Sabbath is honoured by lighting candles, gathering in worship and prayer, blessing children singing songs, keeping silence, walking, reading scripture, making love and sharing a meal.

The recipe for Sabbath observance is essentially the same for Christians. Many of us remember the Sunday customs of our childhood and how, on Sunday, everyone would dress up in their Sunday best, go to church to worship, come home and eat the best meal of the week (their Sunday dinner) and then spend the rest of the day with the family, usually in various kinds of leisure activities.

Today we are considerably more casual and careless about observing the Sabbath and we are poorer, both religiously and humanly, because of this. Much of our tiredness and sense of being overburdened comes from not having a regular Sabbath in our lives.



With this in mind, allow me to offer my own hints for longevity, hints based largely upon a theology of observing the Sabbath.

- * Keep Sabbath with the discipline demanded of a commandment.
- * Sabbath need not be just one day a week. Sabbath can be an hour, a walk, a meal, a drink, a chat with a friend. Plan at least one Sabbath-moment every day.
- * Every day, even if for just a few minutes, go to some place where you cannot be reached. Cell-phones, e-mail and electronic communications have made us the most efficient and connected people in history, but they are also making the observance of Sabbath all but impossible. Go regularly to a place where you cannot be reached.
- * Honour the wisdom of dormancy. Know that when you are not doing something that is productive you are giving your soul the time and space it needs to quietly take in the nutrients it requires to remain productive. Buy a rocking chair and sit in it regularly, not thinking, not praying, not talking to a friend, just sitting - your soul a fallow field that is quietly waiting.
- * Spend some time in quiet and prayer regularly.
- * Be attentive to little children, old people, family, food, wine and the weather. All of these are non-pragmatic and Sabbath-invoking.
- * Live by the axiom: If not now, when? If not here, where? If not with these people, with whom? If not for God, why?
- * Stay in touch with and listen to your body. It will tell you when you need Sabbath.
- * Drink a glass or two of red wine most days, preferably with others.
- * Don't nurse grudges and obsessions, they, more than anything else, will keep you tired and tense.

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