

First Unitarian Church

September 6, 2020

Last week, Bob and I responded to your questions during the sermon time instead of preparing a sermon in advance. There were so many wonderful, deep questions. Among them was one that we didn't get to, but which happened to connect very much with our topic today. The question was,

Dear Ministers, how do we balance our responsibilities to the larger world with the need for self-care?

Let me start by acknowledging that the phrase "self-care" has been hijacked in a really obnoxious way by American culture. To look at the advertisements all around us, you would think self-care was about special shampoo, or splurging on \$50 beard oil, or drinking a whole bottle of wine. Self-care is marketed as something you can buy. This is an expression of the capitalism and individualism of American culture. It makes self-care seem like something for people who have extra money. Like something for people who, according to the measures of the culture, look like they are already doing just fine.

But the scramble to acquire things or to numb ourselves- that's actually the opposite of demonstrating care for ourselves. The culture that tells us to consume things all the time is a culture that is obsessed not with care but with profit. It's a culture that generates a lot of *things*, in order to generate a lot of *money*, and in order to do that it treats people like they are things too. It treats humans like they are tools for generating things or money. People exist to create the things to sell, or they exist to buy the things that have been created—usually both. From that mindset, where people are tools for making profit, came slavery. From that mindset came sweatshops. From that mindset came a minimum wage that is not a living wage, and loopholes where some people—like farmworkers—can make less than minimum wage. That's the culture we are all part of. It would be really hard—perhaps impossible— to not be part of it. If you are part of society at all, at any level, you have to participate. That is simply how our society is structured right now.

Stay with me. I'm talking about this because I want you to understand why, in a few minutes, I'm going to say that true self care—rest and renewal—is a form of resistance.

That culture is why, in the US, it is hard for a family to afford a good life on one income, or sometimes even on two. It's how we got to this place where, usually, a person has to hold down a full-time job in order to have access to something as basic as healthcare for their

self and their family. It's not a culture that takes good care of people who cannot work, like little children and elderly people.

This culture venerates busy-ness and productivity. The Washington Post ran an article last year about time off in the US.<sup>i</sup> It reported that in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, a group of 36 of the world's wealthiest nations, the United States the *only* country that doesn't require employers to give workers annual paid leave. Workers are entitled to no paid time off, not even holidays like Labor Day. Of course, many employers do grant paid vacation leave and holidays, but where they do so, only 45% of Americans use all of the paid leave to which they are entitled. The culture just doesn't encourage it. Instead, what we are encouraged to do is *buy stuff* for "self-care."

The theologian Tricia Hersey calls this "grind culture." It's a culture that grinds people down; wears them out, uses them up like so much stuff. She says capitalism doesn't look at things from an ethical or values place. Instead capitalism asks, "How can we use this being, to push our agenda, to become a tool for our production... If we have to not pay people what they're worth, let's do it. If we only have people working minimum wage, we don't care. People are sick, still come to work. Capitalism does not have a framework for looking at us as human beings."<sup>ii</sup>

Who is served by this? Those who believe they are winning at it by amassing more power and resources than their neighbors. Who is harmed by it? Everyone, ultimately. But if you look at the demographics, at who reaps the least reward for all of their work, you cannot ignore the obvious fact that racism is built into it. Tricia Hersey points out that "grind culture" has roots in colonialism and white supremacy. You can trace it right back to the beginning of this country, when black people were literally regarded as property, and used to build up wealth for whites. In this culture, and in this historical context, she says, slowing down is an act of resistance. And she says that is true for everyone who is ensnared in it. Going slower, we disrupt it. So she launched something called the nap ministry.<sup>iii</sup>

The nap ministry! One of the things she does is creates nap "installations" in public areas, like universities, art museums, community centers, and parks. I have a photo of one from Hersey's blog.

[Link in footnotes. We see a bunch of cushions and blankets spread out in a grassy lawn. There's a shade tent, with a sign on the front that says, "Come Nap." And in the foreground is a handwritten sign that says, "Naps are a healing portal. Join our rest movement."]

Just before the pandemic closed things down back in March, Bob and I went to a ministers' retreat in Colorado. The nap ministry was the focus of our spiritual time at the gathering. There were cushions and yoga mats spread all around the common room in this retreat

center. And I was like, *I'm wearing lipstick*. Also, that's a lot of vulnerability, falling asleep next to colleagues. And vulnerability is great, but I don't know about *that*. I'll just meditate, I told myself. Our facilitator turned on the Nap Ministry's playlist on Spotify. And the next thing I knew, I was waking up.

Why are naps a healing portal? Why is all this napping a "ministry?" It's because it's good for the soul. For thousands of years, the world's wisdom traditions—it's spiritual and religious traditions—have taught the value of rest and renewal. In the Jewish and Christian traditions, that teaching is the reason for the tradition of the sabbath.

In the creation story, the sabbath is the day God rests after the work of creation. Jews honor the sabbath on Saturday, the seventh day. Christians honor it on Sunday. It's a day in which no work is to be done. It's a day for resting, being nourished, breaking bread with family and friends, for prayer, singing, delight, and sensual pleasure.

But the sabbath does not have to literally be a certain day. The point of the sabbath is not to follow a bunch of rules. The point is to nourish the spirit and to ensure that we do not get so busy that we forget to notice our lives. In a sabbath day, or morning, or hour, or any sabbath time at all, we "withdraw from the cares which will not withdraw from us." Those are the words of Maya Angelou. We withdraw from the cares which will not withdraw from us. Those things that have a hold of us and which we are always trying to manage. We take our hands off the wheel, and rest so that we are renewed, so that we can be whole in our lives, and so we can live to love and serve another day.

In his book, which is also called *Sabbath*, Wayne Muller compares the practice of sabbath to the Buddhist practice of taking refuge. "In Buddhism," he writes,

one takes refuge in the Buddha nature, and in the wisdom of the Buddha and in the family of the Buddha. In so doing, we join the company of all those who have sought healing and liberation, we surrender into that place where Buddha-nature already lives within us, and we align our intention with our innate natural perfection. Thus when we sit in meditation, all the saints and ancestors send us loving-kindness, as they accompany our each and every breath.<sup>iv</sup>

I love the idea of the ancestors accompanying us. I think that is also true in the sense that they have bequeathed to us this wisdom about rest and renewal. In the ancient stories it is written down as part of the covenant between the Jews and the source of life itself, "Remember the sabbath." They knew we might forget. And that if we did, it would separate us from what is life-giving. It would cost us, on the soul level. True self care is *soul* care. When I say soul, I'm talking about the part of us that is not made up of parts. I'm talking

about the part of us that notices our lives, the part of us that loves, the part that experiences a sense of purpose and meaning and delight.

Last week, it was getting to that time of year when it feels like it will never cool down. It was such a hot, dry August. The little breaks of gentler weather feel so nice now, don't they? But even though the season will soon be turning to fall, many of us are feeling like we did not really have a summer. Everything was so weird and so stressful. COVID-19 surged in July, right in the middle of it. We couldn't get away for many of the everyday kinds of relaxation and renewal that we usually enjoy in the summer—going to a pool, going to an air-conditioned library, meeting a friend for lunch. Campgrounds were closed a lot of the time, along with movie theaters and summer camps. If you have kids, they were home the whole time, and they still are now, doing remote school for the foreseeable future.

The other day, I was talking with a group of other ministers about why so many people are feeling extra worn out right now, right when society has slowed down a lot, and they said, "It's like there are two buckets." One is the good bucket, full of the things that relax and renew us, or at least energize us and feed us. The other bucket is the BS bucket. That's right. The BS bucket. It has all the other stuff. All the things that are unpleasant, and bring us down or wear us out. Right now, if you're feeling inexplicably tired or even explicably tired, then it's because the bad bucket is too full, and the good bucket is not full enough.

What's in the bad bucket? Grind culture. And anxiety about getting sick. Deep concern about politics and its real-life consequences. The stress of disruption of the lives we are accustomed to. The stress of looking at everyone wearing masks all the time. We are wired for connection. We are wired to seek out and read human faces from the time we are born. There's the stress separation from many of our loved ones. And, perhaps, of too much togetherness with others of our loved ones. The stress of isolation. And all the rest of it. You know what that looks like for you.

We can't wave a wand and fix it. But can we bring a little more balance? I invite you to think of things to add to your "good bucket." And I invite you to make one of them the spiritual practice of sabbath. A radical form of resistance. The sabbath. It's free. You can make up your own rules. You can dedicate a whole day to it, or you can fit sabbath wisdom and practices into your life in other ways.

You can go big. You can set aside a whole day each week when you will rest. I do this on Mondays. Pre-pandemic I spent most Mondays alone, in silence. That's harder now that I'm not the only one in the house, but I still stay as quiet as I can. I eat nourishing food. I take a walk. I meditate. I might write in my journal or listen to a podcast. Whatever brings me *quiet* on the inside.

This is new. I used to have kids at home. It was a lot harder to get all spiritual in a quiet kind of way. But we still need sabbath moments. If you're a busy parent, maybe sabbath is the whole family having a pajama day. Or eating pancakes for dinner and leaving the dishes in the sink until tomorrow and spending extra time with bedtime stories. Whether you have family at home or not, you might take a break from the news for your sabbath, and only read or listen to things that feed your spirit.

Whoever you are, you can also bring a sabbath spirit to the regular activities of your day. Do you remember the parable about the smoking monks? No? Okay. There is a parable about two Buddhist monks who both liked to smoke. A lot. Like, all the time. Concerned about whether it was permissible to smoke during their long periods of prayer, they each agreed to consult with their superiors. One was told in no uncertain terms that smoking was prohibited. The other received praise and a pat on the back. Confused, the disappointed monk asked his friend exactly what he had said to his superior. His friend replied, "I asked him whether it is okay to pray while smoking."

That's *such* a naughty parable. Please don't take it as literal advice.

It's really about perspective. It's like this: once, I found a poem about washing dishes. It's called "*domestic poem*" by Eileen Moeller.<sup>v</sup> It starts like this,

nightfall I sink  
into dishwasher meditation  
steaming china prayer wheels  
crystalline bells of the lost horizon

The poet says her breathing slows, and her muscles soften in the moist heat of dishwater. "Zen poems drip from silverware," as everything frantic about the day is washed down the drain. I taped it that poem above my sink. It brought prayer and stillness to an everyday task that I would otherwise have done without thinking. Kind of like praying while smoking. But much better.

In *An Altar in the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor says people often tell her why it's impossible for them to practice the sabbath, whether they mean a whole day or just a half hour. So, she suggests this exercise. She says:

Make two lists on one piece of paper. On one side of the paper, list all of the things you know give you life that you never take time to do. Then, on the other side, make a list of all the reasons why you think it is impossible for you to do those things. That is all there is to it. Just make the two lists, and keep the piece of paper where you can see it. Also promise not to shush your heart when it howls for the list it wants.<sup>vi</sup>

Most Sundays in the ministers' prayer, we lift it all up to "the great powers of healing, celebration, and renewal known by many names." My prayer for you is that you experience the great powers of renewal in many ways, big and small. That you notice your life and give yourself permission to rest and delight in it, remembering that in a world where so much transformation is needed and we strive to be part of that, that soul-care, that renewal, is in itself an act of disruption and a step along the way.

May it be so.

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<sup>i</sup> Sampson, Hannah. *What Does America Have against Vacation?* 28 Aug. 2019, [www.washingtonpost.com/travel/2019/08/28/what-does-america-have-against-vacation/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/travel/2019/08/28/what-does-america-have-against-vacation/) (accessed Sept. 4, 2020).

<sup>ii</sup> Werning, Kate. "40 Rest as Reparations with Tricia Hersey of The Nap Ministry." Podcast Interview. *Irresistible*, 4 July 2019, [irresistible.org/podcast/40](http://irresistible.org/podcast/40).

<sup>iii</sup> Photo source: <https://thenapministry.wordpress.com/2020/04/13/the-future-is-now-why-octavia-butler-is-our-muse/> (Accessed Sept. 4, 2020)

<sup>iv</sup> Muller, Wayne. *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest*. Bantam Books, 2000.

<sup>v</sup> You can find one version of Moeller's poem here: <http://eileenmoeller.blogspot.com/2012/11/tuesday-poem-previously-published-in.html>. A slightly different version (the one I taped above my sink) was published in *Cries of the Spirit*, an anthology of poetry edited by Marilyn Sewell.

<sup>vi</sup> As qtd. by the Rev. Emily Wright-Magoon in her message, "Sabbath as Whole-Heartedness." <https://www.emwm.org/2017/10/05/sabbath-as-whole-heartedness/> (Accessed Sept. 4, 2020)