



**NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN
UNIVERSALIST CHURCH**

Find a Stillness

Rev. Lissa Anne Gundlach

August 6, 2017

301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 information@neighborhooduu.org

It was that late summer moment in Brooklyn when the lazy days of August just starting to turn to fall. The sun had begun setting earlier and earlier, magenta and gold and the cool colors of winter nights ahead. Walking home from the subway one Friday evening, a friend and I encountered an outgoing man about our age on the street. He stepped up off of his front stoop and stood in front of us as we were about to pass.

"Sorry to bother, but would you be willing to turn off our lights for us? Our apartment is just upstairs."

My friend and I looked at each other with a cynical look of distrust. As you can imagine, it was very rare in New York for strangers to just start talking to you on the street, nevertheless to ask you to do things for them, or invite you into their homes. I looked past the stoop at the decaying Brooklyn brownstone, noticed the mezuzah posted on the doorway, and shrugged. "Why not? I'll be your shabbos goy!" My friend looked at me, slightly confused, as I asked her to hold my things and dashed upstairs after the young man.

After two flights of stairs, the young man quickly disappeared into a cluttered apartment and I encountered another woman my age, just out of the shower, her hair in a towel.

She gestured toward the light switch and said "Thanks!" I did my job flipping the switch and walked back down the stairs. I laughed about it as Alex and I walked home slowly, chatting about the meaning of what had just happened.

We had been invited, for a moment, into the weekly Sabbath preparations of one couple in our neighborhood. As we thought about what we were going to make for dinner, what we were to do that night, our neighbors were frantically preparing not to DO anything at all. For them, all work had stopped, rushing, cooking, even turning on and off light switches.

I knew nothing more about my neighbors other than what they had asked of me, but I can guess that they were preparing for an evening of candle light, food, prayers, singing, and rest.

Every Friday night I passed by my neighbor's apartment, I would look up at the Mezuzah on the doorway and wonder what my neighbors Friday nights and Saturdays were like. My rushing brain stopped for a minute, and remembered that at that moment, people were pausing to observe their faith. They were finding stillness in the midst of city life in a way their ancestors had done for thousands of years. I was deeply comforted by the simplicity of the ritual, which would call to me again and again as I prepared for and then settled into ministry. I wondered if there was something there for me, if being invited into that moment signaled an invitation to the practice of Shabbat itself. I began to study and learn about its history, and to weave the concept into my own spiritual life.

You may know a little bit about Shabbat, or the Sabbath practice, from your own families and friends. Maybe you have practiced it yourself.

So how did the Sabbath originate in Judaism? Although mentioned many times in the biblical books of Genesis and Deuteronomy, the most well known charge to keep Sabbath is from the fourth of the Ten Commandments in Exodus:

Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work... For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.¹

The rabbis and sages have commented and interpreted this text for centuries, describing the Sabbath as a “bride,” a “treasure,” a “gift” to the Jewish people. Perhaps the most accessible and well-known interpretation can be found in Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's slim volume *The Sabbath: It's Meaning for Modern Man*, first published in 1951. He was one of Martin Luther King Jr.'s most influential colleagues, theologically and politically. When you look at those iconic photos of the march from Selma to Montgomery, you will see Rabbi Heschel in front line, arms linked with Ralph Abernathy, John Lewis and Dr. King himself. “When I marched on Selma,” Heschel wrote, “I felt as if my feet were praying.”

Just as King looms large as one of the most cherished and revered Christian theologians and activists, Heschel remains one of the most widely read Jewish theologians and religious leaders of the 20th century. Both of their lives still serve as examples for us today of how to live religiously, not set apart from the world, but by directly confronting the daily conditions and ongoing injustices of contemporary life. Both mined their traditions for the spiritual practices and resources to help their Christian and Jewish communities cultivate resilience for ongoing engagement in justice.

While King coupled Ghandi's nonviolent resistance with the Christian gospel's liberating love ethic, one of Heschel's contributions was to offer the Sabbath as an antidote and necessity for surviving the challenges of contemporary life, placing the particular struggles of the current period of history in the context of the continuity of time.

He described the earliest practice of the Sabbath within the Jewish home, before modern understanding of sacred space of the temple or church set apart for worship. Heschel stressed that the holiest creation is not anything constructed or created by human beings, rather time itself, as a container for human history in which we dwell for the short duration of our lives. It is within the passage of time, from birth to death, that we find meaning in our lives, and become aware of our unique roles within history, to find our life's purpose, and move forward the work of *tikkun alom*, the repair of the world, each in our own way.

Heschel writes:

Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to holiness in time. The Sabbath offers a glimpse of the eternal, a moment each week to enjoy heaven on earth. It is a time where dominion over the world ceases, and humans pause to enjoy the rich abundance of creation.²

Sabbath is not a retreat from the world, but rather an essential tool to live within it. He writes that we need the Sabbath in order to discover a freedom that extends beyond our place in the world of work and the materialism inherent in our capitalist society. We must remember that our lives are more than our work, even

¹ *The Holy Bible*. New International Version. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1984. (Exodus 20:8-12).

² Heschel, Abraham. *The Sabbath: It's Meaning for Modern Man*. New York: FSG, 1979. (10)

if it is meaningful and worthy, and we give our time in exchange for the basic resources we need to survive. Likewise, we must remember that we are not our things—our big houses, our fancy clothes, our expensive cars, or more likely our lack thereof. Heschel calls this “inner liberty.”

Inner liberty depends upon being exempt from domination of things as well as from domination of people. There are many who have acquired a high degree of political and social liberty, but only very few are not enslaved to things. This is our constant problem—how to live with people and remain free, how to live with things and remain independent.

For Heschel, and for us, Sabbath calls us to remember to find freedom within our days, calling ourselves back to the basics of our place not within the world of work, but within community, family, and nature. There is power and beauty in ceasing from our striving, letting go of our ambition and appreciating all we have accomplished in spite of all there is yet to do. There is joy to be discovered in pausing once a week to savor a meal mindfully, either by ourselves or in the company of our beloveds, unbound by what tethers us to the outside world.

Sounds simple enough, right? But how challenging this is to do in our real lives, especially for liberal religious people who are unaccustomed to such tradition, even if we find it appealing.

Our contemporary culture places such a value as “time as money,” and there seems to be “never enough time” or “not enough hours in the day.” Our “always on” cell-phone, social media and the 24-hours a day news-cycle creates few opportunities for pause. Certainly, this summer, it’s hard to take our eyes off of CNN, wondering when the next sweeping policy decision will be made by twitter, or how our nation’s constitutional commitments to justice and equity might be next threatened.

Many of us may wonder how we can possibly take time to find that stillness. There is just too much to be done! And we are people who like to DO things. It is so hard for us to just be, and enjoy our lives without seeing all there is yet to be done.

For many of us, summer is a time where we intentionally take time off our time out from our lives to refresh our bodies, minds and our spirits. We might do things we don’t usually do in our everyday lives— to bring people together to share meals outside and sit and enjoy one another’s company long into the cool evenings. We might seek out beaches and mountains and lakes and wild places where we discover a sense of belonging outside of our lives of work. We might retreat from our everyday lives to find in special places, sacred places, where it becomes easier to connect with what is truly important in our lives, and to enjoy the bounty of beauty that surrounds us.

Whether we stay close to home or travel, it seems to me that summer might invite us to keep Sabbath, whether we intentionally try to or not. And as we look to the end of the summer, of the return back to school and work and the different pace of the fall, we have an opportunity to hold on to our Sabbath keeping here in our daily lives.

What might it look like for you to take the sense of summer Sabbath back into your home this fall?

We each have the freedom to create our own sense of what holy rest might look like for each of our lives. Maybe it's for an hour, two hours, or half the day. Maybe it's an entire Sundown to Sundown retreat. Whatever the amount of time you choose for your Sabbath, it's about what you do, or do not do to honor that time which hallows it. For you, perhaps it is taking a digital Sabbath— turning off your cell phone, the

computer, television or radio for a whole day and simply reflect on all of the pain and violence of the world while also holding the world's deep beauty. Maybe you buy nothing for one whole day. Perhaps you cook a meal from only ingredients from the farmer's market, enjoying what has been created from local land, labor, and harvest. Playing with your kids without interruption. Perhaps for you it means carving out a day to simply be—sleeping, eating, loving, and playing.

What would finding the stillness of Sabbath like for you? When do you experience that sense of time where all seems to be holy? Now think about what it would be like to bring that sense of peacefulness into your life on a regular basis. What changes would you need to make to carve out that "Palace in time" each week for yourself to enjoy your life and relax in its beauty? What preparations could you make so that time could be honored in itself?

I leave you with these words of wisdom from Barbara Brown Taylor, Episcopal Priest and writer, who suggests a practice of Sabbath for those who think they don't have time for it:

Most people I know want to talk about why it is impossible for them to practice Sabbath, which is an interesting spiritual exercise in itself. If you want to try it, then 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.

If a whole day of life-giving freedom is too much for you to imagine, then start however you can. Decide that you will get up an hour before everyone else in the house and dedicate that time to doing nothing but being in the divine presence. Decide that you will turn off the television an hour before you go to bed and spend that time outside looking at the sky. You could resolve not to add anything more to your calendar without subtracting something from it. You could practice praising yourself for saying no as lavishly as you do when you say yes.

What do you think—could you start your Sabbath there? Will you join me in trying to bring this practice into our lives this fall? I think we could all use this support.

So as we look to the end of our summers, this season of time away from the rush of our everyday lives, (and our every week church lives too!) may we savor the beauty of the world that we live in, enjoy the people that surround us, and hallow time as the gift it is. Go now in peace.