



# EXPLORATION

## The Sabbath

### Readings



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#### 1. *Sabbath*

by Rev. Tom Owen-Towle

We ...need to affirm the theological virtue of Sabbath—not merely as a weekly practice by attending Sunday worship, but also as a serious spiritual discipline in our daily flow.

...This much we've found to be true: when humans are trained to observe quality moments of Sabbath every day, all the other life commandments seem to fall into place.

The Sabbath is not only a day denoting the absence of work; it's far more. Honoring the Sabbath is a visible reminder every one of us is more than a cog in the economic and social, machine, that we have a divine right to our bodies and minds.

...Sabbath denotes a way of traversing space and time that includes out-breaks of song and dance, restorative naps and rituals, contemplation and conversation, smiling and breathing.

...Every Unitarian Universalist will shape Sabbaths according to her or his own preference. The scriptures remind us that the Sabbath is given to us and created for us, not the other way around. That's a handy reminder, for Sabbath-time loses its pertinence and power whenever it becomes a batch of compulsions, untrue to one's heart. The Sabbath summons us to find our own best ways to breathe, smile, and relax.

During the day, every little stop

brings something of one's self back to the whole, the way a bee brings nectar to its hive. The pauses in our lives add up.

...The Sabbath marks a day when we live with no other task than to be entirely human, in touch with the depths and heights of our very souls.

Source: *Theology Ablaze: Celebrating the 50th Anniversary Year of Unitarian Universalism* by Tom Owen-Towle

#### 2. *Practice Sabbath*

by Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker

...To keep the Sabbath means, once every seven days, to step outside the dominating culture and enter another space. On a regular basis, stop participating in life as it is defined for us. Choose one day out of seven to not go shopping. To not do any work. To not bring any work home. Instead, give yourself and your family the space to feel what it is hard to feel when you spend all your time, as the poet says, "getting and spending and laying waste your powers." Give yourself time to notice. Walk in the woods.... Give yourself time to sit at the table with friends, to welcome the friendless into your home, to talk with one another. Give yourself time to read, think, and reflect. Gather with a religious community to pray and give thanks. Open yourself to the wisdom of religious tradition, rituals of reconciliation and hope, liturgies of joy, acts of remembrance and sorrow. Stop the madness and rest. Open yourself to the beauty and the meaning of life, to all those tender capacities in yourself and all those dear relationships with others that are to be cherished. Find a way to know the things that the marketplace can neither give nor take away.

...To keep the Sabbath is a radical act of resistance to a culture that has lost track of the meaning of life. From this place of Sabbath keeping, ...become more capable of entering into sustained engagement with the culture of which

we are all part and which needs our active creative witness and our work for change.

Source: *Everyday Spiritual Practice: Simple Pathways for Enriching Your Life*, edited by Scott Alexander. See *Spiritual Practice*

#### 3. *Sunday at Cristo Rey*

by Rev. Jacob Trapp

I ...go to this church frequently to enjoy its beauty (beauty is my manna in the wilderness), but also, and more primarily, for an answer to my need for the numinous. Erik H. Erikson, speaking of this need, said: "The numinous assures us, ever again, of separateness transcended, and yet also of distinctness confirmed, and thus of the very basis of 'I.' Religion and art are the institutions with the strongest claim on the cultivation of numinosity...."

...Rudolph Otto ...stressed the overwhelmingness of the numinous, as the fearful, the awesome, the *Mysterium Tremendum*. But there is also, as he knew, the quietly numinous of "the still small voice within," instead of earthquake and thunder, and this I experience in Cristo Rey, when the soft morning sunlight streams in, when the silence speaks and is felt and listened to, and sometimes deepens into wordless prayer.

...I go to the bilingual services at Cristo Rey because I like the singing ... [in] Spanish.... Sometimes one should or sing or pray only in an unknown tongue, let the mystery within us reach out to the mystery beyond, let that in us which surpasses us be felt and known and loved—the utterly Other, yet also the Innermost. I can experience this more often in churches where there is silence, where there is some mystery in what is spoken and sung, than where there is little or no silence, much talk, and where everything is explicable.

...Emerson ...said, "I like the silent church before the service begins, better than any preaching."

Source: *Return to the Springs* by Jacob Trapp

#### 4. *An Authentic Faith*

by Rev. George Kimmich Beach

[James Luther Adams offered six components of an authentic faith.]

First, an authentic faith focuses our attention on ultimate issues, such as God, human nature, and the meaning of life, but in a way that connects with our immediate, personal, existential life concerns. It links what Adams calls the intimate and the ultimate dimensions of life.

Second, an authentic faith elicits from us a commitment that is costing in some significant way and degree. The primacy of the will means that intellectual understanding follows from the commitment expressed by the original decision in favor of faith and its subsequent life decisions.

Third, an authentic faith wrestles with what St. Paul called “the principalities and powers” (Colossians 2:15) of the world. It takes responsibility for the shape of things to come in the human community. It does not withdraw from the world but even ventures a new beatitude, Blessed are the powerful.

Fourth, an authentic faith seeks to incarnate its spiritual and moral value commitments in the community and world about us in social institutions. It cannot do this by labors of individual virtue or piety but only in groups acting together in history. Therefore, we may say, “By their groups you shall know them.”

Fifth, an authentic faith takes shape in history through the commitments that we, the promise-making animals, make with others. It is shaped by the historical covenants we form within the context of a sacred, encompassing covenant of being.

Sixth, an authentic faith locates itself within the encompassing drama of history. It believes that there is a meaning in history and that the true directive of human life is found in responding faithfully to this meaning. The heart of Adams’s thought about the character of faith is that it takes time seriously.

Source: *Transforming Liberalism: The Theology of James Luther Adams* by George Kimmich Beach

#### 5. *From Sabbath to Sunday*

by G. Peter Fleck

The Sabbath can be seen as ... democratic: the free days are no longer limited to a few but in Israel as a nation all of its members, regardless of their social standing, masters and servants, slave owners and slaves, all are to observe the weekly holiday as God observed it in the beginning.

The early church switched the weekly day of rest from Saturday to Sunday, from the last day of the week to the first, from the commemoration of the Creation to the commemoration of the Resurrection. “Already in the year 321 [the emperor] Constantine had issued a decree which was to eliminate the observance of the Jewish Sabbath from Christian life.... [It] reads as follows: All Judges and common people in the city and all workers in all the crafts are to rest on the holy Sunday.” In 326, the Council of Nicea confirmed this decree. Still, the Jewish tradition apparently maintained itself for “a quarter of a century later—at the Council of Laodicea another resolution had to use very harsh language. ‘The Christians,’ it said sternly, ‘must not Judaize and sit idly on the Sabbath, but ought to work on that day. They must honor the Lord’ Day... by resting inasmuch as they are Christians. But if they persist in being Jews, they ought to be anathema to Christ.’” With these prohibitions against the Christian observance of the Jewish Sabbath, Christianity severed one of the last remaining bonds with its parent religion.

Source: *The Blessings of Imperfection: Reflections on the Mystery of Everyday Life* by G. Peter Fleck

#### 6. *The Case for the Sabbath, Even if You’re Not Religious*

by Menachem Kaiser

...Judith Shulevitz’s ...book, *The Sabbath World*, ...offers an answer ...to the question, “Why celebrate and promote the Sabbath, even in secular form?”

...Does society need a mandatory time-out? We have weekends and vacations, sure, but even those are increasingly bent toward structured pursuits. Our leisure is often as scheduled and hectic as our work—and is, consequently, just as stressful. Sabbath, with its

myriad proscriptions, offers what might be the only authentic form of leisure: the act and fulfillment of doing absolutely nothing productive.

...Something is lost when time is reduced to a commodity; when time is merely exchangeable, in essence, for other goods and services.

...We need, Shulevitz argues, to reestablish and recognize the qualitative aspect of time, not merely the quantitative. “The when of time... matters as much, if not more than, it’s how much.”

...But the Sabbath is more than a personal vacation day imbued with meaning. It’s also our best bet to enact lasting communities. The Sabbath, properly deployed, “promotes social solidarity” according to Shulevitz, with a four-step solution to group cohesion. Work-time is limited. The designated day off is universally shared. The day off is as regular as possible, i.e., weekly. And the day in question is festive. A community with a day like that—a day like the Sabbath—is an actual community, a concept nearly extinct in the offline world.

Source: <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2010/03/the-case-for-the-sabbath-even-if-youre-not-religious/38187/>

#### 7. *Heschel’s Sabbath*

by Jane Vennard

...Jewish scholar and mystic Abraham Joshua Heschel, author of the spiritual classic *The Sabbath*, understands the Sabbath, the seventh day, to be a sanctuary of time. Whereas the other six days are devoted to the tools of space, the building of civilization, this honoring of time creates not just a day but an atmosphere. Within this sanctuary of time, we are able to practice those ways of being that are often ignored or forgotten in the world of space—pleasure, thanksgiving, restfulness, and delight. He writes: “We must conquer space in order to sanctify time. All week long we are called upon to sanctify life through



Photo by Blake Campbell on Unsplash



employing things of space. On the Sabbath it is given us to share in the holiness that is in the heart of time.... The clean, silent rest of the Sabbath leads us to a realm of endless peace, or ...an awareness of what eternity means. There are few ideas in the world of thought which contain so much spiritual power as the idea of the Sabbath.” ... Rabbi Heschel ...also offers us guidelines for what not to do on the Sabbath: “We abstain primarily from any activity that aims at remaking or reshaping the things of space.” ...He tells us not to engage in “any acts that were necessary for the construction of the Sanctuary in the desert.” Rather, we are to be engaged in building the sanctuary of time. He even adds that on the Sabbath we are to ... “even from the strain in the service of God.”

Source: *Fully Awake and Truly Alive: Spiritual Practices to Nurture Your Soul* by Jane Vennard

## Wisdom Story

### *The Horses' Sabbath*

by Estelle Frankel

One Friday morning a group of Hasidim set out for the town of Lublin to spend the Sabbath with their teacher, the legendary clairvoyant Reb Ya'acov Yitzhak, also known as the Seer of Lublin. Reb David of Lelov, whose deep love for animals earned him a reputation as a gifted horse whisperer, was among this group of disciples. After encountering several obstacles and delays on their way, the group arrived just as the sun was about to set Friday afternoon. Fearing that they would be late for Sabbath prayers and miss the seer's holy teachings, the group hastily abandoned their horse and carriage and ran off to synagogue—everyone that is, except Reb David. When the seer realized that Reb David was missing, he sent the others to look for him. Where did they find him?

In the livery, feeding the horses. When they asked him what he was doing there, he responded that all the others had run off without thinking to feed and water the horses, who were weary from the arduous journey, and so he had stayed behind to do just that.

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/14269>

## Snippets

“This world is a place of business. What an infinite bustle! I am awaked almost every night by the panting of the locomotive. It interrupts my dreams. There is no sabbath. It would be glorious to see mankind at leisure for once. It is nothing but work, work, work. ...I think that there is nothing, ... more opposed to poetry, to philosophy, ay, to life itself, than this incessant business.”

*Henry David Thoreau*

“The Sabbath is about honoring those we love and those who love us, honoring the essence of the divine. By turning away from work, from the world, to cherish those we love, we honor the Sabbath. The Sabbath is not about one day. It is about taking time for a daughter's basketball game, a son's track race, a dinner where a family talks. The Sabbath is a moment when a couple sits on a bench and reaffirms love. The Sabbath is the time set aside to nurture all that gives us meaning in life, all that makes life worth living. The Sabbath is the recognition that work, that all the hours we spend making a living, are in fact the means to this end, to the ability to have and sustain love. When we ignore the Sabbath, we destroy that which we should be working to achieve.”

*Chris Hedges*

“The Sabbath and the wilderness remind us of what is true everywhere and at all times, but which in our arrogance we keep forgetting—that we did not make the earth, that we are guests here, that we are answerable to a reality deeper and older and more sacred than our own will.”

*Scott Russell Sanders*

“From out of the chaos of fragmentation, the isolation of illness and disabil-

ity, the lack of a future, a spirituality of hope molds and shapes whatever will keep the flickering candle burning. It may be that the grand dream does not materialize yet; as Isaiah and his followers grew to understand, the constant reshaping of hope in new situations was the prophetic task. It may be that there is not an end to the darkness, only a way of seeing in the dark, only lighting a candle within it. But that is why we keep ...Sabbath time....”

*Mary C. Grey*

“Neglected biblical instructions and traditions could guide us today, such as the practice of leaving the edges of the fields unharvested so the poor can glean from them, leaving land fallow occasionally to replenish its fertility, observing the Sabbath both to rest and avoid overproduction, and periodically forgiving debts and redistributing land in the Hebrew idea of the Jubilee Year.”

*Jim Wallis*

“Sabbath implies a willingness to be surprised by unexpected grace, to partake of those potent moments when creation renews itself, when what is finished inevitably recedes, and the sacred forces of healing astonish us with the unending promise of love and life.”

*E. L. Doctorow*

“The words *cure* and *curious* share the same root. During Sabbath, we can listen with openness and curiosity — what Buddhists call *choiceless awareness*. Here, voices can speak to us, voices we hear only in the quiet. Only at rest can we hear what we have not heard before, and be led to what is most deeply beautiful, necessary, and true.”

*Wayne Muller*

“Revived and renewed by the spiritual energies of the Sabbath, each person then has the challenge of how to translate the hope for a better world into specific ways of relating to people in our everyday lives. This charge is described by the award-winning novelist Alice Walker, best known for *The Color Purple*. ‘Anybody can observe the Sabbath, but making it holy surely takes the rest of the week.’”

*Leonard Felder*



“There is a brokenness in creation that we all know. The wolf and the lamb do not yet lie down together. We swat the mosquito. We are wary of demons cut off from grace. And yet in a calm, trusting, sabbath mind, there is a sense of the promise that birthed Isaiah’s pastoral prophecy of a peaceful creation. We accept the community that we can share now, and yearn for and somehow trust the promise of that full community of creation yet to come.”

*Tilden Edwards*

“We all need a certain amount of ‘fallow time,’ Yvonne reminds me. ‘Watching the grass grow, sitting on the hillside, staring out the window daydreaming. When we don’t have it, there is a deeper intelligence that won’t come forth.’ Mine is a racehorse rhythm, and once I get started in the morning it’s difficult for me to stop. Now I can see that a pause—even a very *small pause*—is extremely useful. These ‘little Sabbaths’ replenish my body—and spirit.”

*Sue Bender*

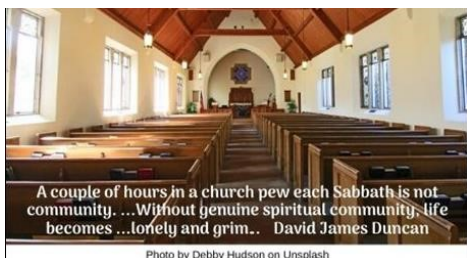
“Shabbat and the sabbatical year become central precisely because they are vehicles for introducing a different kind of consciousness, one that reconnects us with the earth’s rhythms and challenges the priority of making, conquering, subduing, shaping the world to our immediate needs.” *Michael Lerner*

“The way of play was a part of all religions. St. Paul proclaimed himself a “fool for Christ.” Jews honor the Sabbath, that time to stop working and to take pleasure in life. Hindus say that the universe was created as *lila*, divine play. ...Muslim Sufis teach through jokes about Mulla Nasrudin, a laughable sage/fool. Native Americans celebrate bawdy trickster-figures. ...Buddhists practice meditative games of breathing, attention, and joyful presence. Zen teachers poke fun at dogma.” *Drew Leder*

## Questions

The following questions are for your consideration.

- In reading #1, Tom Owen-Towle writes, “The Sabbath marks a day when we live with no other task than to be entirely human...” When in your life have you worked to be “entirely human?” How did you do it? What was the result? If you haven’t done that, is it something to which you aspire? Why or why not?
- Owen-Towle also writes, “Honoring the Sabbath is a visible reminder every one of us is more than a cog in the economic and social, machine, that we have a divine right to our bodies and minds.” Have you ever felt that you were just a cog in the machine? If yes, what were the circumstances and what was the impact on you? If no, how do you think being a cog would affect you? He also writes, “Every Unitarian Universalist will shape Sabbaths to her or his own preference.” How would you shape a Sabbath whether it was for a day or simply an hour?
- In reading #2, Rebecca Parker writes, “...To keep the Sabbath is a radical act of resistance to a culture that has lost track of the meaning of life.” Do you agree with her that our culture “has lost track of the meaning of life?” Why or why not? How could Sabbath-keeping contribute to finding meaning in life?
- In reading #3, Jacob Trapp wrote about his need for the numinous. Often, the numinous can be found in nature, in beauty, and in art, all of which evoke the feeling of being in the presence of a mysterious “something” that is greater than us. While the experience can’t be manufactured, an openness to life can invite it. Have you experienced the numinous? If yes, what were the circumstances? If no, is it something to which you aspire? Why or why not?
- In reading #4, George Kimmich Beach describes James Luther Adams’ six components of an authentic faith. Which two of these are most compelling to you? At the end of the reading Beach writes, “The heart of Adams’s thought about the character of faith is that it takes time seriously.” Do you take time seriously? If yes, how? If no, why not? How could keeping a Sabbath help people take time seriously?
- In reading #5, G. Peter Fleck explains how Christianity rejected the Jewish Sabbath in favor of the Lord’s Day on Sunday. It illustrates how early antisemitism emerged within Christianity. Based on what you know about the Jewish Sabbath and the Christian Sunday, compare the two. Is one more compelling than the other? Why or why not?
- In reading #6, Menachem Kaiser asks, “Why celebrate and promote the Sabbath, even in secular form?” How would you answer this question? [In July 2011, Alain de Botton spoke in Edinburgh about “Atheism 2.0,” an idea of atheism that also incorporates our human need for connection, ritual, and transcendence. His TED Talk about this suggested that atheists could learn valuable things from religious practice. (See [https://www.ted.com/talks/alain\\_de\\_botton\\_atheism\\_2\\_0?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/alain_de_botton_atheism_2_0?language=en)) In October 2014, he tweeted, “Consider taking not a regular Sabbath—but a Digital Sabbath.”] Kaiser writes, “Something is lost when time is reduced to a commodity; when time is merely exchangeable, in essence, for other goods and services.” How can we move from a quantitative awareness and use of time to a qualitative embrace of time? How can Sabbath-keeping promote, as Judith Shulevitz suggests, “social solidarity?”
- The wisdom story, *The Horse’s Sabbath* by Estelle Frankel, suggests indirectly a feature of the Jewish Sabbath: that it is for all of creation, including animals. In the story, who was more faithful in terms of Sabbath-keeping, Reb David or the others? How does this story illustrate the difference between the



letter and the spirit of the law about remembering and keeping the Sabbath holy?

**The following questions are related to the Snippets.**

9. Henry David Thoreau suggests that when we live by business and work alone our lives are infinitely impoverished. Do you agree? In the next quote, Chris Hedges makes the same point, writing, “The Sabbath is the time set aside to nurture all that gives us meaning in life, all that makes life worth living.” What gives your life meaning? Which of those things could be incorporated into a Sabbath practice? Hedges also asserts that Sabbath-time is fundamentally about expressing and sustaining love. Does the busyness of your life push love to the margins? How can you place love in the center of your life?
10. Scott Russell Sanders places wilderness on a level with the Sabbath. How could Nature be incorporated into a Sabbath practice as the Transcendentalists did? How can both Sabbath-keeping and connecting with Nature temper our anthropocentric arrogance?
11. Mary C. Grey writes that, given our ongoing experience of chaos, fragmentation, and isolation, “the constant reshaping of hope in new situations was the prophetic task.” Do you agree? Why or why not? What role does hope play in your life? How could Sabbath-keeping strengthen hope? In this, what role does the metaphor of the Sabbath candle play?
12. Jim Wallis extends the prophetic role of the Sabbath. He indirectly suggests that observing the Sabbath is also an act of social justice. How is this true? Why is this important?
13. E.L. Doctorow emphasizes the Sabbath qualities of renewal and heal-

ing. Where do you go and what do you do in your life to foster renewal and healing? How are these actions Sabbath-like? What would be the value of incorporating these actions into a weekly practice?

14. Wayne Muller writes, “Only at rest can we hear what we have not heard before, and be led to what is most deeply beautiful, necessary, and true.” Where in your life do you schedule rest in order to deeply listen to life and your life? Is this adequate to the challenges and demands of your life to live a good life? Why or why not? How might Sabbath-keeping make deep listening a regular spiritual practice?
15. Leonard Felder quotes Alice Walker: “Anybody can observe the Sabbath, but making it holy surely takes the rest of the week.” Do you agree? Why or why not? Consider that for each six days we are involved in creation (i.e., work), wherever and however we do this, the seventh day is for rest, to both reflect on the past six days, and to consider the next six days. How often do you look upon your life, your work, and your rest, and say, “It is very good?” How might you create more goodness?

ate and sustain Beloved Community?

17. Sue Bender coined the term “little Sabbaths” in her 1995 book, *Everyday Sacred*. How could taking little Sabbaths support your Sabbath-keeping?
18. Michael Learner practices Sabbath-keeping because it fosters a different kind of consciousness. What constellation of values do you think would comprise a Sabbath-consciousness (aka Sabbath mind)?
19. Per Drew Leder, what role could intentional “play” take in our Sabbath-keeping?
20. In the reading, *Heschel’s Sabbath*, Jane Vennard summarizes the approach to Sabbath-keeping articulated by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. He noted that the six days prior to the Sabbath made use of the tools of space, while the purpose of the Sabbath was for us to build a Sanctuary of Time. What activities and rituals could you employ in building a Sanctuary of Time?



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16. Concerned about the brokenness in creation, Tilden Edwards coined the term “Sabbath mind.” How can we cultivate a Sabbath-mind? Does it make sense that cultivating a Sabbath-mind is a primary goal of Sabbath practice? Why or why not? How can a Sabbath-mind help cre-