

## “Unplugged”

Rev. Shawn Newton

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

19 June 2016

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Once upon a time, the executive of a large company  
took a vacation, on doctor’s orders,  
in a small village on the coast of Mexico.

Unable to sleep  
after an urgent phone call from his office  
on the first morning away,  
he walked out to the pier to clear his mind.

A small boat with only one fisherman had just docked,  
and inside the boat were several large yellowfin tuna.

The executive complimented the fisherman on the quality of his catch.

“How long did it take you to bring in all of those fish?” he asked.

“Only a short while,” the fisherman said.

“Then, why don’t you stay out a little longer and catch even more fish?”  
the puzzled man asked.

“Because I have more than enough here  
to support my family and give a few to my friends.”

“But . . ., but what do you do with the rest of your time?”

As the man in the boat unloaded the fish into a basket,  
he looked up and smiled.

“Oh, I sleep late, fish a little, play with my children.  
I take a siesta with my wife, and stroll into the village each evening,  
where I sip wine and play guitar with my amigos.

I have a full and busy life, Señor.”

The business executive laughed and stood tall.

“Well, sir, I have an MBA from Harvard,  
and I think I can be of help to you.  
You should spend more time fishing,  
and with the proceeds, you could buy yourself a bigger boat.”

“In no time, you could buy several boats,  
and eventually, you could own an entire fleet.”

“And, instead of selling your catch to the fishmonger,  
you could sell directly to consumers,  
and eventually open up your own cannery.”

“You could control the product, the processing, and the distribution.”

“Now, of course, you would need to leave this small fishing village behind,  
and move to a big city, where you would run  
your expanding enterprise with a solid management team.”

The skeptical fisherman then interrupted him,  
“But, Señor, how long will all of this take?”

“Fifteen to twenty years. Twenty-five tops,” the executive promised.

“And what then, Señor?”

With a sparkle in his eyes, the man said,  
“See, now that’s the best part.  
When the time is right, you could sell your company to the public  
and become very rich. You’d make millions.”

“Millions, Señor? And, then what?”

“Well, then you would retire and move to a small fishing village,  
where you would sleep late, fish a little, play with your kids,  
take a siesta, and stroll to the village

where you could sip wine and play your guitar with your amigos ...”<sup>1</sup>

How easily we can forget that so often  
paradise is to be found in the here and now—  
and that to “while away the hours”  
isn’t necessarily the same thing as wasting time.

As we approach the Solstice tomorrow and the long days of summer,  
life seems to shift for many of us to a blessedly slower pace,  
offering us time to give thought to what really matters—  
a time to look for, and hopefully celebrate,  
the things that bring deep meaning and joy to our lives.

For some, that, of course, involves seeking after fortune,  
working hard to achieve important goals.

There’s much to be said for the intense feeling of accomplishment  
that comes from striving toward and reaching some great aim.

Satisfaction of this sort can be particularly sweet.

But, there is also much to be said—and maybe even more—  
about the simple pleasures that come from savouring one’s life,  
of recognizing along life’s way the moments that make up  
everything we may ever know of paradise, right here and right now—  
by taking time  
to cease from all of our doing and to simply be,  
so that we might be awake to ourselves  
and to what life is really asking of us in this present moment.

There is an art to living this way.  
An art to slowing down the beat of our hearts  
and stilling the stirrings of our minds.

An art to regularly setting aside “time out of time”  
when we rest from our labours,  
and can begin to see again the larger arc of our lives  
and listen to our heart’s deepest desire.

---

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from the telling in *The 4-Hour Workweek* by Timothy Ferris.

I've been struck in my travels by how much better other cultures do this in comparison to us.

It's hard to travel beyond North America and not return thinking that much of the rest of the world knows something about the meaning of life that we simply seem unable or unwilling to grasp.

I've witnessed (and feel envy for) the easy conviviality that just seems to come with the culture in places like Italy and Spain.

And I've been amazed to see with my own eyes, even with all the hardships that attend daily life for so many, that people living amid the political strife in The West Bank or in the slums of Nairobi or Mexico City, still seemingly enjoy their lives so much more than is true for many of us.

The difference seems to have something to do with our relationship with time.

And the ability to step away from life's regular rhythms, and set aside its many demands and countless distractions.

I was reminded of this again last weekend, when Bob and I joined a rabbi friend of ours and her family for Shabbat Dinner.

As the sun set, we all marked the beginning of the sabbath together.

We turned off our phones, and gathered around the table.

The two shabbos candles were lit, and prayers of deep gratitude were shared.

Blessings were given for each person, followed by the exchange of hugs with the wish of "Shabbat Shalom," the wish for a peaceful sabbath.

As Bob and I walked home that night,  
I wondered how anyone could resist the desire to keep sabbath,  
given that it's such a powerfully grounding, life-affirming experience.

Of course, Sabbath in the Jewish tradition involves more than a quiet dinner.

Sabbath is meant to be an intentional pulling away  
from all of life's routine demands.

A day when all work, all effort is strictly forbidden.  
The commitment to keeping the Sabbath, of course, has long defined Jews.

But the concept, if not the same day of the week,  
was incorporated into Christianity  
and has influenced the cultural context in which most of us grew up.

Many of us were raised in places with some restrictions  
on what could and couldn't be done on Sundays.

Growing up in Texas, I remember the odd "Blue Laws," as they were called,  
which dictated that you could buy nails on Sunday, but not a hammer,  
because to use the hammer would be working. . .

Toronto also had some strange laws.

The Sabbath and Public Order By-laws came into effect here  
in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when citizens' groups  
pushed for ways to uphold public morality.

The Toronto Police were responsible for licencing and regulating  
dance halls, pool halls, theatres, and later, movie houses.

They were also charged with making sure that, on Sundays,  
the streetcars did not run,  
that alcohol wasn't sold or consumed,  
and that there definitely wasn't any sledding or playing ball in High Park.<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly, there were serious class differences

---

<sup>2</sup> Homel, Gene Howard, "Sliders and Backsliders: Toronto's Sunday Tobogganing Controversy of 1912", *Urban History Review*, Vol. X, No. 2, 1981.

in how these laws were enforced.

Someone once observed that what was forbidden came perilously close to any historian's description of what working-class people actually did for fun back then.<sup>3</sup>

While streetcars sat parked in their stations, chaffered carriages could be seen out and about town.

While baseball was forbidden, the well-to-do played golf, as it was clearly not, according to court records from the time, the sort of game spelled out in the by-laws.

And, though it was illegal to buy or consume alcohol on Sundays, it was common to be served a drink in the parlours and private clubs of the wealthy.

As a woman convicted of public intoxication at the time stated to a judge, "The only difference between me and Lady Flaherty in Rosedale is that I don't have a powdered flunkey to carry me up to bed when I get drunk."<sup>4</sup>

Now, as funny and antiquated as that all might sound, the practice of Sabbath even in our own day can sometimes go to intriguing extremes.

I recall a visit to Baycrest, the Jewish hospital up on Bathurst, that has a "Sabbath Elevator"—an elevator that from sundown on Friday until sundown on Saturday runs automatically between the floors so no one inadvertently breaks the Sabbath by calling the elevator.

It's these kind of innovations that help me better understand Jesus' resistance to upholding the letter of the law...

But I believe there's something to be said for shifting into a different mode, especially in our constantly open-for-business world,

---

<sup>3</sup> Boritch, Helen, *The Making of Toronto the Good: The Organization of Policing and Production of Arrests, 1859 – 1959*, unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Toronto, 1985, p. 101.

<sup>4</sup> Denison, George T., *Recollections of a Police Magistrate*, Toronto: 1920. pg. 11.

with a round-the-clock media presence  
that demands so much of our attention.

Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel spoke of the Sabbath  
as a “great cathedral” in “the architecture of time.”

He noted the correspondence, in Latin,  
between the word for temple (“templar”) and for time (“tempus”).

The Sabbath is a temple made of time.

“It is a day,” he said,  
“on which we are called upon to share in what is eternal in time,  
to turn from the results of creation  
to the mystery of creation;  
from the world of creation to the creation of the world.”<sup>5</sup>

And so I wonder, do you ever make that sort of turn?

Do you set aside a day a week, or an hour a day, to simply rest and be?

Do you take time in a committed, consistent way  
to honour yourself and your connection  
with the life that is within and beyond you?

I suspect that most of us don’t. At least not intentionally.

As much as I try, and as central a spiritual practice as this is for me,  
I’ll confess it’s something I struggle with almost every single week.

That’s because it’s not easy, and in our ever-connected world,  
it’s not exactly getting easier for any of us.

But, the truth is that the busyness of modern life  
means that we need, all the more,  
to pull away to visit that temple made of time.

I’m reminded of Gandhi who once said:  
“I have so much to accomplish today

---

<sup>5</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man*, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1951, p. 10.

that I must meditate two hours instead of one.”

It’s hard to remember such wisdom  
when we’re drowning in the details of our to-do list.

And, to be clear, I’m not speaking only to those of us who are still working.

The retired folks in this congregation are easily  
some of the busiest people I’ve ever known!

While great meaning can be found  
in those things to which we do devote our days,  
we would do well to carve out the time for rest and reflection  
that ensures our spirits are replenished  
and helps us to gauge whether we are investing our lives  
in accord with our deepest values and highest vision.

There is a price to be paid  
in not taking the time to connect with these aspects of our being.

Thomas Merton named the excessive demands  
that distract us from our core commitments  
as “a pervasive form of contemporary violence.”

He said that, “To allow oneself  
to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns,  
to surrender to too many demands,  
to commit oneself to too many projects,  
to want to help everyone in everything,  
is to succumb to violence.”

[Our frenzied activity], he said,  
“destroys the fruitfulness of our own work  
because it kills the root of inner wisdom”  
which makes our work meaningful and useful  
to ourselves and to the world.

What I find intriguing is that brain studies  
are now backing up what Merton said more than half a century ago.

Without time to daydream and to let our minds wander where they will,

we inhibit our own creativity.<sup>6</sup>

When we think we're getting ahead by doing ten things at once,  
we're actually weakening our performance of everything we're trying to do.<sup>7</sup>

And when we chronically overwork,  
we pretty quickly reach a point of diminishing returns.

While these may sound like secular reasons for keeping Sabbath,  
I believe they are spiritual reasons, as well.

In his book, *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest*,  
Wayne Muller writes: "I use the word Sabbath...  
[to represent] a specific practice, [as] a larger metaphor,  
a starting point to invoke a conversation  
about the forgotten necessity of rest. . . .

"Sabbath time is time off the wheel,  
time when we take our hands from the plow. . .  
while we drink, if only for a few moments,  
from the fountain of rest and delight."

But he points out that: "Sabbath is more than the absence of work;  
it is not just a day off, when we catch up on television or errands.  
It is the presence of something that arises  
when we consecrate a period of time to listen  
to what is most deeply beautiful, nourishing, or true.

"It is time consecrated with our attention, our mindfulness,  
honouring those quiet forces of grace or spirit that sustain and heal us."

By this definition, I think the world desperately needs  
a steady practice of keeping sabbath.

We need time focussed on rest and relationships.  
We need time devoted to mindful attention.  
We need time dedicated to honouring what sustains and heals us.

---

<sup>6</sup> John Tierney, "Discovering the Virtues of a Wandering Mind," *The New York Times*, 28 June 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Matt Richtel, "Outdoors and Out of Reach," *The New York Times*, 15 August 2010.

We need time to listen to our inmost heart  
and for the call to live with courage and faith.

This feels vitally true in the present moment we're living through.

Not just because of the horrible heartache and anger  
coming out of Orlando this week,  
but even more because of the steady stream of information  
that speaks to the worrying ways our world  
is growing more and more out of balance.

Though there are, of course,  
signs of hope and human goodness to be found all around,  
there is justified cause for concern, if not alarm,  
about the path humanity is on.

I hear this reflected in my conversations with many of you.  
And I know it can be overwhelming to take it all in  
and be filled with despair.

It's an understatement to say  
we live in profoundly complicated times.

But what the world needs  
is people who are awake to this moment.

What the world needs is people  
who are so deeply grounded in the values of justice and peace,  
that they are able to challenge the status quo  
and demand a dramatic change of course.

But to do that effectively and faithfully, people need rest.  
They need perspective.  
They need space to summon the healing power of their own hearts.  
And they need time.

For clarity, purpose, and resolve.

In a word, people need the sabbath.  
We need the sabbath.

Yet, as compelling as the temple made of time can be,  
it's worth asking what keeps us from visiting more often—  
what holds us back from making it a regular feature of our lives?

A clue can be found, I think, in the best-selling book,  
*Journal of a Solitude*, by the Unitarian poet May Sarton.

The first entry, September 15<sup>th</sup>, she writes:

I am here alone for the first time in weeks,  
to take up my 'real' life again at last.

That's what is strange—that friends, even passionate love,  
are not my real life, unless there is time alone  
in which to explore and to discover  
what is happening or has happened.

Without the interruptions, nourishing and maddening,  
this life would become arid.

Yet I taste it fully only when I am alone here  
and 'the house and I resume old conversations. . .

The ambience here is order and beauty.  
This is what frightens me when I am first alone again.  
I feel inadequate.

I have made an open place, a place for meditation.  
What if I cannot find myself inside it?

[In this journal] I hope to break through into the rough,  
rocky depths [of life], to the matrix itself.

There is violence there and anger never resolved.  
And, my need to be alone is balanced against my fear  
of what will happen when suddenly I enter the huge, empty, silence."<sup>8</sup>

I think what Sarton points to so powerfully  
is that when we slow down,

---

<sup>8</sup> May Sarton, *Journal of a Solitude*, pp. 11-12.

it's not only rest we may find.

As anyone who has ever sat meditation knows,  
when we try to still our minds,  
just about everything that's ever troubled us  
is sure to bubble to the surface.

Hard questions and old hurts.  
Grief and ambiguity.  
Petty resentments and sometimes unspeakable pain.

Worked on and worked through, though,  
this is the bedrock, blessed stuff of spiritual growth.

Each week, every day, we are presented with an invitation  
to enter into the vast and sometimes daunting Sabbath silence  
from which our lives might more powerfully speak.

As we slip more fully into summer,  
may we all find ways to keep Sabbath in the days and weeks ahead.

May we enter into that life-giving temple of time—  
where we marvel at the world of creation  
and are renewed to take up our part  
in the ongoing creation of a better world.

May we live to make it so.

Amen